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**AN ASSESSMENT OF THE LIVERPOOL CITY  
COUNCIL RAISING ACHIEVEMENT SERVICE AS  
A LEARNING ORGANISATION**

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University of  
Chester for the degree of Master of Business Administration

**CHESTER BUSINESS SCHOOL**

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# Abstract

The increasing pace of change has created a general consensus that organisations need to find better ways to learn (Argyris 1999). Concepts of the Learning Organisation and organisational learning have developed from a subject for serious academic study to a ‘hot boardroom topic’ (Burnes 2004). Although as relevant these days to public sector organizations, there has been much less research in this area, and what does exist tends to emphasise the negative impact of public sector bureaucracy, hierarchy and political influence on capacity to learn.

This research investigates the Liverpool City Council Raising Achievement Service, one department in the now integrated Children’s Services, which successfully transformed itself following a disastrous 1999 Ofsted inspection of what was then the L.E.A. The research takes place at a particular time of change and uncertainty when the future of the Service, and the individuals in it, are under threat. This is impacting on the clarity of the organisation’s ‘vision’ and on individuals’ perceptions of their capacity to influence the new agenda.

Following a phenomenological philosophy the research uses a mixture of inductive and deductive approaches which incorporate existing literature and normative frameworks (in particular Senge, 1990; Marsick & Watkins, 1993; Pedler, Burgoyne & Boydell, 1997) to create the research instruments. A review of the literature leads the author to the construction of a conceptual model which links the three inter-dependent levels of learning: individual, collective (group) and systems-wide or organisational learning.

There is no *yes* or *no* answer to the question of whether the R.A. Service is a learning organization, and if it is accepted as Finger & Brand (1999) state, that it is an ideal to aspire to, then it is concluded that there is evidence of both positive and negative contributory factors. It is clear from the research that strengths in one area (e.g. individual learning) will be adversely affected or at worst negated, by weaknesses in another (e.g. structures and systems). The report ends with recommendations to improve organisational learning at this crucial time.

# Declaration

This work is original and has not been submitted previously for any academic purpose. All secondary sources are acknowledged.

Signed:

Date:

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# **1. Introduction**

## ***1.1. Background to the Research***

The concept of the “learning organisation” derives from the work of Argyris and Schon in the 1970’s. (1978). Their “single loop” and “double loop” learning model suggests that most organisations concern themselves with error detection and correction, rather than deeper enquiry and questioning. During the 1980’s, writers including Peters and Waterman, Revans and Deming, attempted to link the philosophy of learning to the actions, and survival, of organisations. A greater emphasis on building a committed workforce, satisfying customer needs and, above all, the capacity to adapt to accelerated change, has created a general consensus that organisations need to find better ways to learn (Argyris, 1999; Griggs & Hyland, 2003). However, it was Senge’s book ‘The Fifth Discipline’, in 1990 which popularised the concept of the ‘Learning Organisation’. Since then, literature has been preoccupied with refining the way in which learning, knowledge and the learning organisation can be conceptualised (Buchanan & Huczynski, 2004).

The increasing pace of change in both the private and public sectors has developed the concept of organisational learning from a subject for serious academic study to “a hot boardroom topic” (Burnes, 2004, p. 126). Organisations need to acquire and utilise increasing amounts of knowledge if they are to make the changes necessary to remain competitive or indeed relevant.

The organisational context of this research is the Raising Achievement Service, a section of Liverpool City Council Children’s Services. This was part of the Local Education Authority (LEA) prior to the amalgamation of education and social care in 2006 as a result of the Children Act 2004. Its members (around 75 employees plus support staff) are mainly educationalists, a number of them ex-headteachers and senior teachers. They are joined by a common purpose, to work with schools to raise the achievement of pupils in the context of the Government ‘Every Child Matters’ agenda, in a relationship which is both supportive and challenge-based. This link between the Local Authority and schools is continually evolving; a process of accelerated change began when the 1988 Education Reform Act gave schools more financial autonomy through the Local Management of Schools (LMS). Most recently, in 2005 the Government introduced a system-wide reform

under the banner of the “New Relationship with Schools” (DfES, 2005), which is fundamentally changing the way in which schools interact with Local Authority officers. The last 8 years has also seen a considerable change in the structure, culture and reputation of the education services in Liverpool. The 1999 Ofsted inspection of the then Liverpool Education Authority was scathing about all aspects of the service (Ofsted, 1999). The report highlighted significant failures in the areas of strategic planning, a lack of vision and direction, weak performance management, poor integration of strategies, incoherent partnerships and provision and insufficient consultation of ‘stakeholders’. By September 2000 a further inspection reported a dramatic turn-around (Ofsted 2000). In the interim a new Executive Director had been appointed, and 5 of the 6 senior managers had gone; overall a sixth of the workforce had left the Service. The 2000 inspection report noted newly delegated decision-making powers to officers, improved performance management, better cohesion between strategic and operational planning, good consultation systems and a more ‘supportive environment’. Leadership and management were judged to be of ‘considerable quality’.

These improvements were sustained and built on over the next 6 years, and the Annual Performance Assessments have been consistently good or very good.

## ***1.2. Research Question***

The issue to be addressed in this research is what, in the particular circumstances of LCC Raising Achievement, can be learned from the literature on learning organisations (and organisational learning), which could then be applied to positively impact on the quality of service it provides and ultimately, to ensure its survival and growth in the current climate of change.

The problem will be addressed by an examination of the application of theoretical concepts of the “learning organisation” to the loose and amorphous group which constitutes “Raising Achievement”. Normative models of organisational learning will be used as a “standard” by which to measure the Service, and the relevance of existing prescriptive tools and techniques will be examined in context, to arrive at conclusions and recommendations for improvement.

The research question therefore is:

**“An assessment of the Liverpool City Council Raising Achievement Service as a Learning Organisation”**

The research aims are:

1. To critically review contemporary thinking on learning organisations and organisational learning.
2. To assess the extent to which the Liverpool City Council Raising Achievement Service is functioning as a learning organisation.
3. To compare and contrast the findings of (1) and (2).
4. To draw conclusions and make appropriate recommendations to improve the current situation at the Liverpool City Council Raising Achievement Service based on the findings from (3), above.

### ***1.3. Justification for the Research***

On theoretical grounds, it is important to examine the concept of the learning organisation from a public sector perspective, where service quality rather than competitiveness has historically been the driver for change but where, more recently, remodelling, downsizing and the introduction of competitive markets have forced public managers to examine their own and their department's relevance and adaptability as a means of survival.

The usefulness of organisational learning concepts is also examined; a number of authors have pointed to their problematic aspects (Thompson, 1995; Tsang, 1997; Buchanan & Huczynski, 2004).

From a practical point of view, this research is particularly timely, with the appointment of a new Assistant Executive Director in charge of the Raising Achievement Service, the changing role of a number of officers to becoming “School Improvement Partners”, and the loss of a number of experienced officers through restructuring, retirement and redundancy following the transfer of resources from the centre to individual schools. Posts in Raising Achievement have already been ‘deleted’; as significant grant funding for non-statutory services comes to an end and the necessity for cost-cutting looms across the

whole of Children's Services, the need to provide a flexible and cohesive service attractive to schools becomes all the more imperative.

The apparent transformation of the service following the failed Ofsted inspection in 1999 also raises questions about how the organisation moved from systemic failure to delivering 'consistently above minimum requirements to users' by 2006 (OFSTED, 2006). Liverpool was the only LEA which got out of Special Measures without its management and services being outsourced. This would suggest that successful organisational learning of a transformational nature has taken place. The amalgamation of Education, Health and Social Care in 2006 has made cross-agency strategic planning an imperative, and its success will be measured in October 2007 by a Joint Area Review (JAR). This research examines learning processes from the perspective of Raising Achievement officers themselves, and will be of use in highlighting both opportunities and threats to continuous improvement based on organisational learning.

## **1.4. Methodology**

A phenomenological approach is used in this investigation. This is a small study in the researcher's own organisation and of necessity the epistemological assumption is interpretive, being defined by the researcher's interaction with that being researched (Jankowicz, 2005)). This approach stresses the subjective aspects of human activity by focusing on the meaning, rather than the measurement, of social phenomena (Collis & Hussey, 2003).

The research is inductive in nature, being most appropriate to the small size of the study, the qualitative nature of the data to be collected, and the close involvement of the researcher. The research is cross-sectional; data has been collected over a short period of time. Although chosen due to time restraints, it also ensures that chronological changes do not affect the conduct of the research. The study is exploratory in nature, to provide flexibility and a broad focus in the process of understanding how existing theory can assist in understanding the particular circumstances of the organisation (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2006). This is examined further in Chapter 3.

A combination of research strategies is utilised, combining survey and case study methods. Questionnaires have been administered to selected staff in Raising Achievement,

followed up by semi-structured interviews with a cross section of staff, to elicit more detailed qualitative data.

The research is limited to one section of a large Local Authority, which has its own particular characteristics created from local historical and political circumstances. Although it may share characteristics in common with other public sector groups, it should be stressed that the generalisability of this research beyond the Liverpool context, is limited. The professional training and background of most Raising Achievement officers (i.e. from the hierarchical culture of schools, where 'learning' is the core task), also gives this group characteristics which will not be replicated in other Local Authority settings.

### ***1.5. Outline of the MBA Dissertation***

Following on from this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 builds the theoretical foundation for the research, examining literature around the concepts of learning organisations and organisational learning. Research questions or hypotheses are identified which serve to focus and direct the research. The chapter concludes with the construction of a conceptual model which is used to answer the research question.

Chapter 3 describes and justifies the major methodology used to collect the research data, and demonstrates how all critical procedures and processes have been followed. The chapter concludes by covering ethical considerations of the research.

Chapter 4 presents and analyses the data collected, with reference to their relevance to the research questions. Results are presented in summary tables and figures. At this stage, references to literature discussed in Chapter 2 are limited.

Chapter 5 gives a critical evaluation of the adopted methodology before presenting conclusions about the research objectives and the research question. It outlines the limitations of the research, and points to opportunities for further research in this area.

Chapter 6 makes recommendations for improvement, based on the conclusions of the research, with suggestions for implementation.

## **1.6. Definitions**

### *Learning Organisation:*

A Learning Organisation is one “capable of continuous regeneration from the variety of knowledge, experience and skills of individuals within a culture which encourages mutual questioning and challenge around a shared purpose or vision” (Johnson, Scholes & Whittington, 2005, p. 589)

*Organisational Learning:* Organisational learning is defined by Dixon (1994) as: “the intentional use of learning processes at the individual, group and system level to continuously transform the organization in a direction that is increasingly satisfying to its stakeholders” (p.5).

### *Raising Achievement Service as an Organisation:*

The term “organisation” in the context of this research needs some explanation. The LCC Raising Achievement Service is a section of a much larger organisation, LCC Children’s Services (prior to amalgamation it was part of the Local Education Authority). It is not as cohesive as a collection of structured teams or as loose as a number of individuals sharing the same space. As a group of people under a single manager, sharing a common purpose – to raise the educational achievement of children in Liverpool schools – it fits the definition of a *company* as defined by Pedler, Burgoyne & Boydell (1997): “any collective endeavour....a group of people engaged in a joint enterprise” (p.5). It is the researcher’s *premise that the literature on learning organisations is applicable to LCC Raising Achievement*, despite its rather amorphous structure.

## **1.7. Summary**

This chapter introduces the research problem and research question. Then the research is justified, definitions are presented, the methodology is briefly described and justified, the report is outlined, and the limitations are given. On these foundations, the dissertation can proceed with a detailed description of the research.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. The Learning Imperative**

#### **2.1.1. External Pressures**

In a rapidly changing environment, learning faster and better than others is seen as a major competitive advantage: “In the long run, the only sustainable source of competitive advantage is your organization’s ability to learn faster than its competition.”(Senge, 1994, p. 11). Organisations that can identify and foster their organisational learning enhance their intellectual capital in the form of knowledge and know-how about their organisation’s learning (Lennon & Wollin, 2001).

#### **2.1.2. The Public Sector Perspective**

Finger & Brand (1999) believe that public service organisations are exposed both to growing competitive pressure and pressure by politicians to improve services in a climate of reducing revenues. Butler (1994) believes that public sector organisations in Britain appear to change their structure and mode of operation, if not their ownership, almost as frequently as private sector businesses. He concludes that improvements in effectiveness and efficiency to meet the new aspirations of ‘customers’ can only be made via new and continuous learning.

As part of the Government’s drive for responsive, high quality public services, the 1999 White Paper *Modernising Government* suggests that the public service must become a Learning Organisation (Smith & Taylor, 2000). Formal learning in delivered programmes at all levels is still the more usual format for achieving this (Betts & Holden, 2003). However, Harrison (2005) provides evidence that public sector organisations in this country are increasingly diverting money from employee training into pay awards to improve recruitment and retention of staff.

Smith & Taylor (2000) and Finger & Brand (1999) point to a dearth of literature on organisational learning in the public sector, the majority of which appears to emphasise the constraining factors on learning, such as hierarchies of fixed roles, ambiguity of purpose, task obsession and related short-termism and the absence of rewards for risk-taking. These point to structural, cultural and political characteristics, which are examined



later in this chapter. Nor have public sector organisations been at the forefront of organisational learning implementation programmes (Betts & Holden, 2003).

Exceptions to this include Smith & Taylor's work with Civil Service organisations (2000), which concludes that ambiguity over purpose is the greatest inhibitor of organisational learning capacity. Vince's (2000) research, undertaken with 147 local authorities in England & Wales, suggests that there is an over-emphasis on the development of individuals, to the detriment of organisational learning. Issues of power and control predominate, and a 'blame culture' reduces incentives to take risks. In their case study of a Local Education Authority in England, Betts & Holden (2003) conclude that for organisational learning in the public sector to be effective, it must be collective, processual and above all cognisant of organisational power patterns.

Rashman & Hartley's (2000) research into knowledge transfer in Beacon Councils points to tensions between the emphasis on performance management and measurement, and the need to promote innovation and organisational capacity for change. The greatest barrier to learning was identified as 'initiative fatigue', associated with restraints caused by prioritization of resources. The political environment was also seen as instrumental, with a particular challenge being the need to engage elected members in the development of a learning strategy.

Despite these constraints and qualifications, it should be emphasised here that whilst reaching the ideal status of a 'learning organisation' may be an aspiration rather than a reality for the public sector ( and arguably for the private sector ), adopting the processes of organisational learning is seen universally as positive for both individuals, organisations and society as a whole. Indeed, Finger & Brand conclude that "the only conceivable way of transforming public sector organisations today is in terms of a collective learning process" (1999, p.136).

## **2.2. Conceptual Clarification**

### **2.2.1 Learning Organisation or Organisational Learning?**

The term ‘organisational learning’ is often used inter-changeably with the term ‘learning organisation’ (Easterby-Smith & Araujo, 1999; Burnes, 2004, Buchanan & Huczynski, 2004). Pedler et al (1997) and Easterby-Smith & Araujo (1999) see a dichotomy between descriptive definitions offered by academics who focus on detached analysis and understanding of learning processes within organisations, and the more action-oriented, pragmatic and prescriptive definitions cited by practitioners and consultants, who are attempting to change organisations through ‘recipes’ and tools to maximise learning.

Finger & Brand (1999) offer clarification by describing the learning organisation as an *ideal* towards which organisations have to evolve, and organisational learning as the *activity* and the *process* by which organisations eventually reach this ideal. Tsang (1997) simplifies it even further: “there is a simple relationship between the two – a learning organization is one which is good at organizational learning” (p.127).

Denton (1998) sees the distinction as both unhelpful and unnecessary, and advises against involvement in artificial dichotomies. This advice is followed here; the two terms are used interchangeably and both perspectives are used to gain insight in to the research question.

### **2.2.2. Definitions and Classification**

The literature and research on organisational learning and the learning organisation are fragmented, and there has been no widely accepted model (Garvin, 1993; Griggs & Hyland, 2003). Dixon (1994) offers 11 definitions of learning organisations /organisational learning. Appendix 1 offers a selection of models by eight authors from both academic and normative perspectives. What they appear to share in common is a view of organisational learning as a process which occurs over time, and at different levels from individual to systems-wide (Miner & Mezias, 1996). Blackman & Henderson (2005) conclude that differences between authors are a matter of emphasis on particular inputs, rather than any substantial disagreement about the composition elements.

It should be noted that there is a significant body of work critical of the concept of organisational learning (Miner & Mezias 1996; Weick & Westley, 1996).

Denton (1998) points out that the discussions of organisational learning have often bordered on the utopian, far removed from everyday business imperatives. Miner & Mezias (1996) talk of a 'thin bridge' between consultants and managers who advocate 'organisational learning, and many learning theorists, and conclude that the reason for the lack of outstanding qualitative empirical research on organisational learning is that "it is excruciatingly hard to do well" (p.95). Weick & Westley (1996) conclude that learning is merely organisational change by another name. Perhaps a more pertinent question is whether learning results in positive outcomes (Husymann, 1999). Denton (1998) identifies problems of measurement and causality, as well as sustainability of short-term outcomes.

For the purposes of this report we continue on the basis that the learning organisation is "an attractive, if elusive vision" (Pedler & Aspinwall, cited in Denton 1998, p. 156).

Descriptive definitions acknowledge the fact that all organisations learn, consciously or otherwise (Matlay, 2000). In this way, the debate centres on understanding the quality of learning in an organisation, assessing whether it can be improved, and how we may usefully intervene (Sutton, 1994; DiBella, 1995). This pragmatic approach is an attractive one as it avoids judgements of 'success' or 'failure' and appears to offer a greater degree of flexibility to fit different organisational structures and contexts.

## **2.3. Individual vs. Collective Learning**

### **2.3.1. Introduction**

One of the barriers to understanding the organisational learning process has been the difficulty in bridging the gap between individual and collective learning (Dixon, 1994). Theories of individual learning are of assistance in explaining how learning takes place *within* organisations. Theories of learning *by* organisations are more complex; Hedberg (1981) likens organisational learning to individual learning, believing that organisational memories preserve certain behaviours, mental maps, norms and values over time. Considerable evidence suggests that we need to address specifically individual, collective

(group) and organisational levels of learning (Miner & Mezias, 1996; Popper & Lipshitz, 2000).

## **2.3.2. Individual Learning**

### **2.3.2.1. Personal Mastery**

The starting point for many writers on organisational learning and the learning organisation is individual learning (Argyris & Schon, 1978; Probst & Buchel, 1997; Antonacopoulou, 2006). In his seminal work 'The Fifth Discipline' (1990), Senge asserts that "organizations learn only through individuals who learn" (p. 236). His 'learning disciplines' of personal *mastery* and *mental models* relate to this individual level of learning. Here, learning is concerned primarily with individual cognition, with learners seeking out and reflecting on new experiences.

Senge defines personal mastery as "learning to keep both a personal vision and a clear picture of current reality before us ... to generate a force within ourselves called 'creative tension'". The lofty rhetoric and poetic language used appears to obfuscate the simple message; decide where you are now, where you want to be, and strive for it. However, research by Blackman & Henderson (2005) suggests that in reality, most employees' assessment of their learning needs is triggered by appraisal systems, so the individual nature of learning is lost.

Dixon (1994) believes human beings have a drive to learn, as a source of pleasure as well as a survival mechanism: "we are a learning species" (p.32). That we are all learning, albeit at times subconsciously, is clear. However, the assumption that we are all *striving* to learn must be open to question.

### **2.3.2.2. Single and Double Loop Learning**

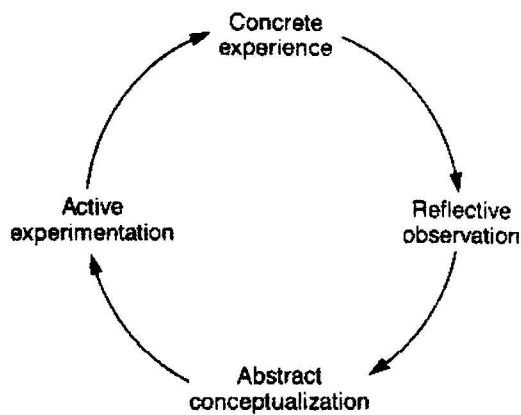
Argyris & Schon (1978) see learning as the detection and correction of errors, and developed the concept of single-loop and double-loop learning (later termed *adaptive* and *generative* learning by Argyris (1999). Butler (1994) believes individuals require new skills in order to master double-loop or generative learning: "generative learning is about

creating; adaptive learning is about coping” (p.463). This suggests a hierarchy of learning: single-loop learning may fail to question and challenge taken-for-granted assumptions, whereas double-loop learning suggests a ‘deeper’ level of collective understanding and reassessment of values and assumptions.

**2.3.2.3. The Learning Cycle**

In contrast to the hierarchical, linear model of learning, cyclical models suggest that learning is a continuous process which will be helped by working through a series of stages (Easterby-Smith & Araujo, 1999). David Kolb (1984) describes learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (p. 38). Building on the work of Lewin and Dewey, he suggests that learning should be viewed as a circular process, beginning with concrete experience, making observations and reflections on that experience, forming abstract concepts and generalisations based on those reflections, and testing those ideas in a new situation, which leads on to another concrete experience (Fig. 2.1, below).

**Fig 2.1.** Kolb’s Experiential Learning Cycle.



Reproduced from Kolb (1984), *Experiential Learning*, p. 42.

The emphasis here is on the *process* of learning, for example, how individuals transfer experience into learning, and what styles they brings to this process. Individuals may focus more on one stage of the learning cycle than another, dependent on their learning style, but all the stages are necessary.

The proposition that learning through experience takes the form of a neat cycle is however open to challenge. Cheetham (2001) suggests that learning is much more fragmented and chaotic than the cycles portray. Research also suggests that in practice, individuals, whatever their style, spend most of their time planning and acting, and much less on observation and reflection (Butler, 1994). Butler (1994) believes that well- educated people in particular ‘short-circuit’ the learning cycle by moving directly from discovery to explanation and prescriptive lists of solutions. Argyris (1999) calls this ‘skilled incompetence’; the manager uses highly honed skills yet creates consequences he/she did not intend.

#### **2.3.2.4. Mental Models**

The experiential learning cycle does not address the role of memory; this can be conceptualised as the retention of past learning, which affects our thinking processes and the actions we take (Kim, 2004). Senge (1994) defines these as ‘mental models’, “the images, assumptions and stories which we carry in our minds, of ourselves, other people, institutions and every aspect of the world” (p. 235). Mental models not only help us make sense of the world, they can also restrict our understanding to that which makes sense within our mental model.

#### **2.3.2.5. Training**

Research by Mumford (1994) and others suggest that many senior managers believe that by providing opportunities for formal training, they are creating learning organisations (McHugh, Groves & Alker, 1998). However, even within the limits of formal training, it appears there is little evidence of prior identification of learning needs or subsequent analysis of needs met (Kolb, Lublin, Spoth & Baker, 1994). Blackman & Henderson’s (2005) research suggests that training processes designed to enhance reflection and communication are distinctly lacking.

#### **2.3.2.6. Action Learning**

The rejection of the ‘expert’ trainer or facilitator and the premise that learning comes from doing, is the basis for the theory of Action Learning. Reg Revans (1998) is attributed with pioneering the theory of action learning, starting with the premise outlined in the much-

repeated quote: “there can be no learning without action and no (sober and deliberate) action without learning” (p.54). Like experiential learning, action learning emphasises the cyclical processes of critical reflection on concrete experiences. It also assumes a deeper level of learning (Pedler, 1997).

Both training and action learning imply that learning is formal or deliberate. However, Marsick & Watkins (1997) suggest that the majority of learning in organisations occurs through informal and incidental learning. Informal learning is unstructured, and in the control of the learner; incidental learning is a by-product of other activities, interpersonal interactions, experimentation or “sensing the organizational culture” (Casey, 2005, p.134).

#### **2.3.2.7. Self-Development**

Personal or self-development is a recurring theme in the learning organisation literature (Symon, 2002). Here, it is the learners themselves who takes primary responsibility for diagnosing their needs and choosing their goals for learning and development. In this way employees are encouraged to continually develop, learn and acquire new knowledge. As well as being a way of coping with change, it is also envisaged that this will make work more rewarding and stimulating for employees (Senge 1990; Pedler et al, 2001).

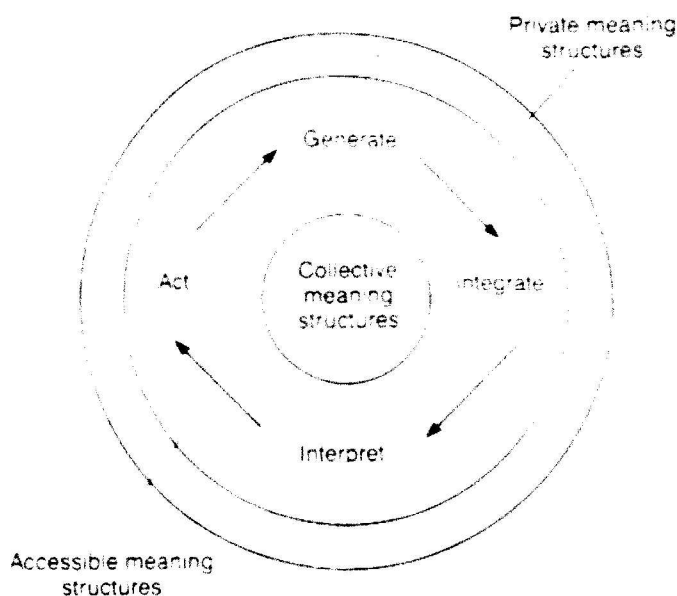
To be effective, there need to be appropriate facilitating structures to support a culture of self-development (Antonacopoulou, 1999). It appears that the concept of the ‘learning organisation’ has contributed to the shift from self development aimed at individual fulfilment, to the goal of organisational effectiveness. Thus Pedler et al state: “the manager’s job is to learn on behalf of the organisation’ (2001, p. 4). Research by McHugh et al (1998) demonstrates that despite open-ended intrinsic commitment to employee development, the ‘locus of control’ is still with the employer, in that learning must be shown to achieve objectives related to the task and role (p.218).

### 2.3.3. Collective learning

#### 2.3.3.1. Shared Mental Models

Collective learning is seen as more than the accumulation of individual learning (Dixon, 1994; Kim, 2004; Thomas & Allen, 2006). Nancy Dixon's collective learning cycle seeks to link individual and collective learning (Fig. 2.2, below). The process is reliant on moving from individual to shared, collective meaning structures, what Dixon calls 'cognitive maps', to encompass stored experiences as well as knowledge and information. In common with the individual learning cycle, the four steps of generating, integrating, interpreting and acting on information must all be connected and built upon, or the learning is lost.

**Fig. 2.2.** Dixon's Organizational Learning Cycle.



Reproduced from Dixon, N. (1994). *The Organizational Learning Cycle: How we can learn collectively*. p.45.

For Kim (2004), making individual mental models explicit is crucial to developing shared mental models, and allows organisational learning to be independent of any specific individual.



### 2.3.3.2. Shared Vision

Senge (1990) describes shared vision, his third 'learning discipline,' as "essentially focused around building shared meaning ... (this is) a collective sense of what is important, and why" (p.299). People create a sense of shared purpose and destiny, based on agreed vision, values, mission and goals. In this context Senge is talking essentially about groups spanning organisational hierarchies and boundaries. He does not address the problems which can exist when visions become diverse and polarised, as the number of groups in the organisational or inter-organisational debate expands. As Reeves & Boreham (2006) state: "vision building is fundamentally political" (p.476).

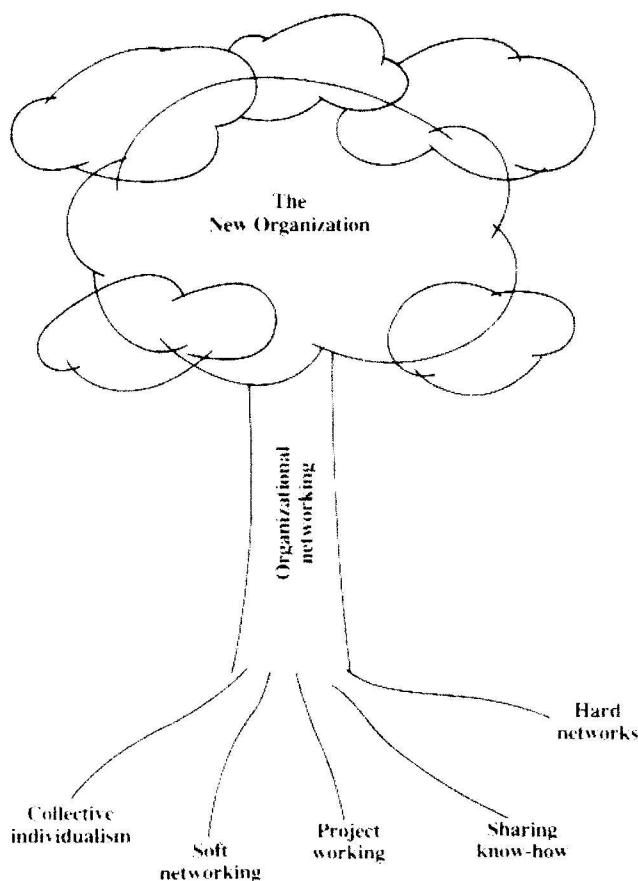
Senge (1990) believes that shared understanding is achieved through *dialogue* and *skilful discussion*. He uses the metaphor of a jazz ensemble to convey the dialogic process of group learning. Weick (1995) emphasises that shared meaning comes from relationships and interactions, concluding: "people need to meet more often" (p.186).

The concepts of tacit and explicit knowledge are pertinent here (Smith, 2001; Evans & Kersh, 2004; Nonaka, 2004). Smith (2001) describes tacit knowledge as 'technical or cognitive...made up of mental models, values, beliefs, perceptions, insights and assumptions' (p.314). Tacit knowledge, specific to the individual and derived from their own experience, is often the most valuable to an organisation (Nonaka, 2004). Tacit knowledge can only become explicit, and therefore codifiable, through communication and dialogue (Evans & Kersh, 2004). Smith (2001) reports on studies suggesting that 90% of the knowledge of an organisation is embedded in peoples' heads, and warns of dire consequences of downsizing, reorganisation and job changes

Barker & Camarata (1998) offer a social exchange approach to emphasise that communication networks create mutual concern and respect, particularly important when organisational loyalty is diminishing. In a similar vein, Griggs & Hyland (2003) warn against the disruption of often informal social networks or 'social capital' (p.180), which is often the primary mechanism by which knowledge exchange and combination occur. It is easier for explicit knowledge to become tacit (and vice versa) when people cooperate, trust each other and willingly contribute their own valuable knowledge resources (Smith, 2001). Rashman & Hartley (2002) argue that the cognitive elements of tacit knowledge are *precisely those elusive qualities of best practice which organisations need for innovation.*

Hastings (1993) describes networking as “the open asking for and sharing of ideas, experience and information” (p.16), and sees it as the basis for organisational learning in the ‘New Organization’. The five ‘roots’ of networking suggest that both formal and informal networks are vital, with relationships between individuals, built through constant communication as the key (Fig. 2.3, below). Relationships and networks disintegrate when people move on, making it hard for those who come in to replace them.

**Fig. 2.3.** The Roots of Organisational Networking.



Reproduced from Hastings, C. (1993). *The New Organization* (p.59). Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill.

**2.3.3.3. Groups and Teams**

Team learning is Senge’s fourth ‘learning discipline.’ He says: “teams, not individuals, are the fundamental learning unit in modern organizations” (1990, p.10). Similarly, Marsick & Watkins (1997) see teams as the link between individual learning and organisational

learning. The aim is to produce teams who are working in synergy and unity, through the creation of shared meaning, vision and understanding (Ayas, 1999; Wenger, 2004).

The importance of team learning is widely accepted, but there are difficulties associated with it. Slack, Chambers & Johnston (2004) point out that teams are often asked to make decisions but are given insufficient responsibility to carry them out. This can induce stress in team members, which will inhibit team learning. At its best, learning in teams forces people to confront others' viewpoints, which they might otherwise ignore. However, teams can also block learning, by inhibiting the adoption of new forms of behaviour by team members (Burdett, 1994). This is a reminder that people must learn to work together effectively; as well as technical skills, they will require interpersonal and communication skills, and problem-solving skills (Wellins, 1994).

Buchanan & Huczynski (2004) talk of the transformation of a group in to an (implicitly, more desirable) team, through a learning process of self-management by group members during which they organise themselves to fulfil a purpose. Self-directed or self-organising work teams are recommended by many authors as a means of creating an empowered work culture (Wellins, 1994; Nonaka, 2004).

In any event, Critchley & Casey (2004) argue persuasively that the mantras of 'teamwork' and 'teambuilding' are based on the false premise that openness and trust are essential to achieve what are generally task-centred, intellectual decisions. They recommend that *groups* identify the nature of tasks to be addressed, and then consider appropriate modes of working; the more uncertainty in the group's task, the more it must share. Critchley & Casey (2004) point particularly to Local Authority management teams, who "steadfastly refuse to move out of the bottom (independent) mode of working, tacitly deciding *not* to work together (p.496).

In their research with a Local Authority Education Service, Reeves & Boreham (2006) find it more useful to use the concept of 'activity sets', first developed by Engestrom, as groups or collectives who commonly interact in pursuit of a particular objective or activity. This acknowledges that people can belong to a number of 'sets', which create their own discourse and artefacts to develop shared meaning.

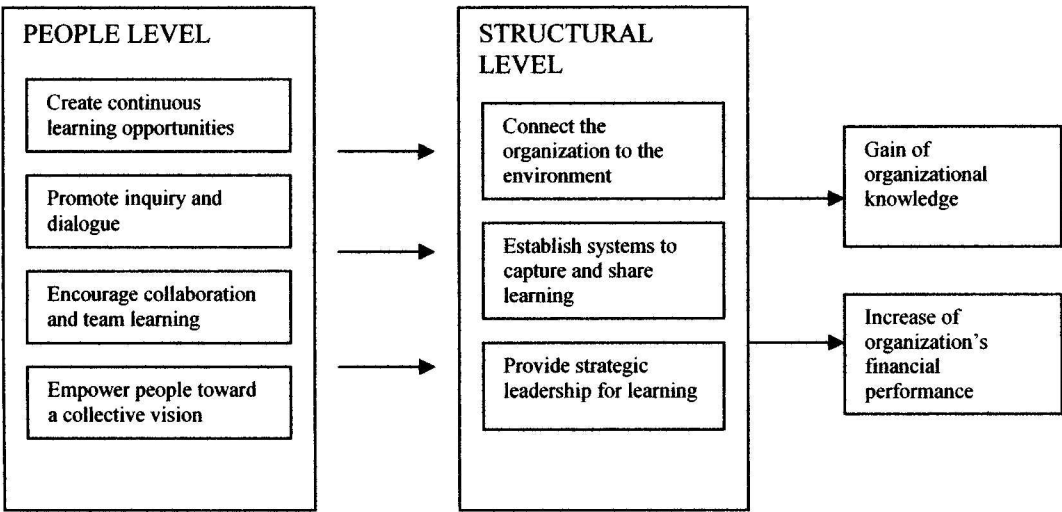
This would seem particularly pertinent in the public sector, where large organisational structures and cross-functional working require more fluid and functional groupings.

**2.4. Organisational Learning**

**2.4.1. Whole systems learning**

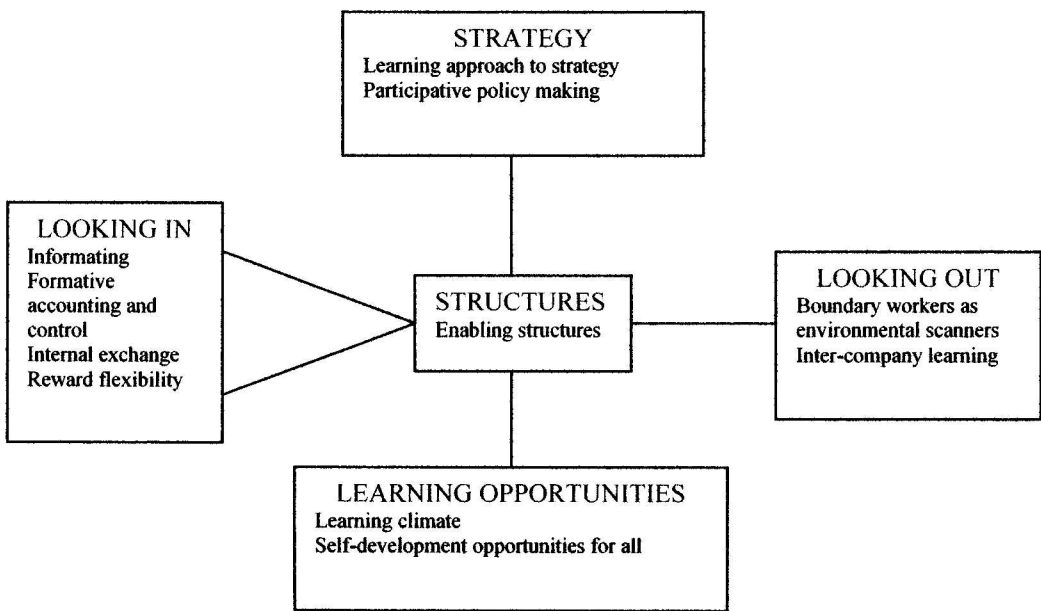
‘Systems thinking’ is Senge’s fifth and most fundamental learning discipline, integrating all the others described earlier. This is the discipline of seeing wholes rather than parts, working with patterns and relationships to make change more effective (Senge, 1990, 1994; Pedler et al, 1997). The 8 models outlined in Appendix 1 all include systems-wide dimensions. Two other models are discussed here in more detail; Marsick & Watkins (1993) 7 Dimensions of Organizational Learning (Fig. 2.4, below) and Pedler et al’s (1997) 11 Characteristics of the Learning Company (Fig. 2.5, overleaf).

**Fig. 2.4.** Marsick & Watkins’ Theoretical Framework of Learning Culture and Organisational Performance.



Reproduced from Yang (2003). Identifying Valid and Reliable Measures for Dimensions of a Learning Culture. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 5(2), p.156.

**Fig. 2.5.** Pedler et al’s 11 Characteristics of the Learning Company



Reproduced from Pedler et al (1997). *The Learning Company. A Strategy for Sustainable Development*, p.37.

These two models have been highlighted for a number of reasons. Although both are examples of the prescriptive, ‘consultant-led’ approach, they are set in an academic context of organisational learning, and are given legitimation through their inclusion in a number of academic and empirical studies (for example, Yang, 2003; Buchanan & Huczynski, 2004; Harrison, 2005). Both models include aspects of individual, collective and organisation-wide learning. Marsick & Watkins’ model (1997) is interesting as it focuses on the ‘measurement’ of organisational culture, manifested in behaviours and attitudes. Pedler et al’s (1997) sub-categorisation include ‘looking in’ and ‘looking out’ to emphasise the importance of the organisational environment and context. Both models are the basis for assessment tools, which are used to develop the research instrument in this study.

However, both models were the product of research on, and are clearly primarily designed for use with, private sector companies, though the authors do not specify this. Pedler et al’s model particularly, highlights ‘reward flexibility’ and ‘formative accounting and control’, which are less pertinent in all but the higher echelons of public sector organisations.

Examination of these and other models in the literature suggests that system-wide, organisational learning is particularly influenced by strategy, structures and systems, culture, and leadership. These factors are considered in turn, below. Whilst not explicitly mentioned in most models, the organisational learning context is fundamentally affected by the political environment (Denton, 1998), which is also discussed.

### **2.4.2. Strategy**

Strategy in this context refers to both the strategic development and direction of the organisation, and to the strategic importance placed on organisational learning. Leavy (2004) points to writers such as Mintzberg and Senge, who first posited the notion of strategy-as-learning. The static notions of strategy as decision making, positioning and ‘strategic fit’ have been dismissed as outmoded for today’s turbulent economic climate (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand & Lampel, 1998; Altman & Iles, 1998). Page & Ogley (2006) contend that the concept of emergent change is “more concerned with organisational learning and continuous improvement than with strategy per se.” Johnson, Scholes & Whittington (2005) echo Gary Hamel’s call for ‘resilient’ organisations that continually reinvent themselves.

McGill & Slocum (1993) remind us that learning organisations’ commitment to continuous improvement through experimentation means that some change strategies are bound to fail. They advocate flexibility and “the conscious consideration of contingencies” (p.77) as ways of minimising such failures. In applying these concepts to the public sector, the issues of bureaucratic structures and public accountability must restrict this flexibility and acceptance of failure.

Pedler et al (1997) talk of a ‘learning approach to strategy’, based on the learning cycle, where previous policies are critically reviewed, and “new directions are chosen with exploratory or experimental objectives in mind; new ventures have built-in monitoring and evaluation mechanisms” (p. 77).

The involvement of all members of the organisation, together with key stakeholders in developing strategy, is also emphasised. Marsick & Watkins (2003) talk of ‘global thinking’, and the crossing of inter-and intra-organisational boundaries (and barriers) to

facilitate the sharing of knowledge and experience. Pedler et al (1997) describe the role of 'boundary workers' who scan the external environment to bring information back in to the company from users, suppliers, partners etc. Strategic perspectives focus on issues such as strategic alliances, joint partnerships, benchmarking, stakeholder analysis, and learning from users and customers (Altman & Iles, 1998). These have also been adopted in the public sector as legitimate avenues for building strategy. It is pertinent here to remember however, that the 'who benefits' question in strategic planning is greatly complicated by the existence of multiple stakeholders, including the amorphous and elusive 'society as a whole' (Finger & Brand, 1998; Harrison, 2005).

### **2.4.3. Structures and systems**

It has been shown that structured teams can both facilitate and hinder learning (Burdett, 1994). Senge (1994) describe functional teams and departments as "steel-reinforced concrete silos" which impede learning (p.446). However, Rashman & Hartley (2002) believe that large organisations structured as a series of communities, teams or workgroups have greater potential for innovation than those constituted of loosely coupled individuals. The rise of self-managing teams, corporate clusters, communities of practice, cross-functional teams and delayering is seen as a means of increasing organisational learning (Denton, 1998; Smith & Taylor, 2000). Peddler et al (1997) give 'enabling structures' as one of their characteristics of a learning company, and describe a range of new structures or 'learning spaces', which can be physical, social or psychological (p.128).

Looking at the relationship between work structures and individual learning, Beer, Eisenstat & Spector (1993) believe that to change individual behaviour by addressing knowledge and attitudes, is to get the change process the wrong way round. They advocate the realignment of work roles, by putting people into new organisational contexts, thereby imposing new roles, responsibilities and relationships on them: "This creates a situation that, in a sense, 'forces' new attitudes and behaviours on people" (p.99).

Information management systems should encourage effective communication, facilitate the analysis, design and building of knowledge (Page, Orange & Burke, 2000), and assist in the measurement of outcomes and performance (Denton, 1998).

Pedler et al (1997) see 'informating' as essential in order to empower members to act on their own initiative. They use the term 'telemating' to describe collaborative enquiry via computer networks, using the medium for creating new shared understanding and meaning.

The goal of the 'paperless office' has been promulgated by public sector organisations for a number of years; communication other than by e-mail and intranet is often positively discouraged. However, the risk of this technology-dependent approach is that it may ignore how people actually communicate and use knowledge in organisations. A number of researchers conclude that whilst IT is an excellent information repository, it does not necessarily assist in knowledge construction (Harrison, 2005), and will only add value if people actually use it (Smith, 2001).

#### **2.4.4. Culture and leadership**

There are a number of definitions of organisational culture (Burnes, 2004). Buchanan & Huczynski (2004) use the following:

“the collection of relatively uniform and enduring values, beliefs, traditions and practices that are shared by an organization’s members, learned by new recruits, and transmitted from one generation of employees to the next” (p.875).

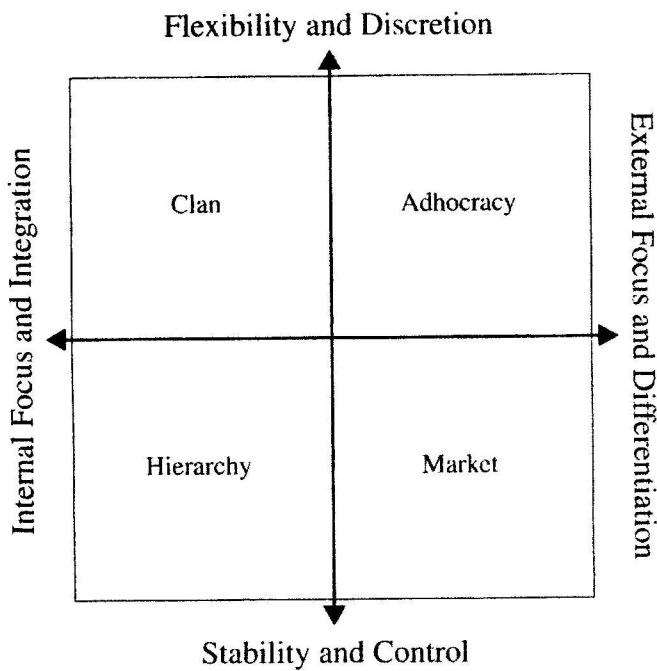
Parker & Bradley (2002) suggest that despite the push towards 'private sector' competitive ideologies, public sector organisations continue to be oriented towards a traditional hierarchical culture, because of their emphasis on rules, procedures and stability. Mitki, Shani & Meiri (1997) state that “the structural characteristics that lead to highly efficient, predictable performance, get in the way of organizational learning needed to sustain that performance” (p.444). In their work with two health authorities, Lines & Rickets (1994) see the dissolution of 'command and control' management as fundamental in creating the climate for change and mechanisms for effective communication. The growing trend towards flatter hierarchies is an attempt to reduce bureaucracy, diminish hierarchy and therefore foster effectiveness, efficiency and corporate responsibility (Rashman & Hartley, 2002).



Reeves & Boreham (2006) believe that the restrictions of Government policy and its concomitant hierarchies of administrative control make the construction of new practices to improve communication and coordination essentially impossible to achieve. Caulkin (cited in Harrison, 2005) paints a desperate picture of public sector culture, characterised by low employee expectations (linked to poor incentives and rewards and low ambition), low morale (high stress levels, long working hours, coping with excessive change, and limited training opportunities) and a sense of rigidity ( caused by centralised targets, low discretion, and narrowly defined job roles).

Using the Competing Values Framework, Cameron & Quinn (1999) place the public sector clearly in the Hierarchy Culture (Fig. 2.6. below). However, whilst structures and procedures are fundamental, there is also evidence in the public sector of an increasing focus on measurable goals and targets (market culture), and teamwork and participation (clan culture). The adhocracy culture, seen in the ‘post-modern’ organisation, is the form usually associated with creative thinking and rapid learning (Buchanan & Huczynski, 2004).

**Fig. 2.6.** Organisational Culture and the Competing Values Framework

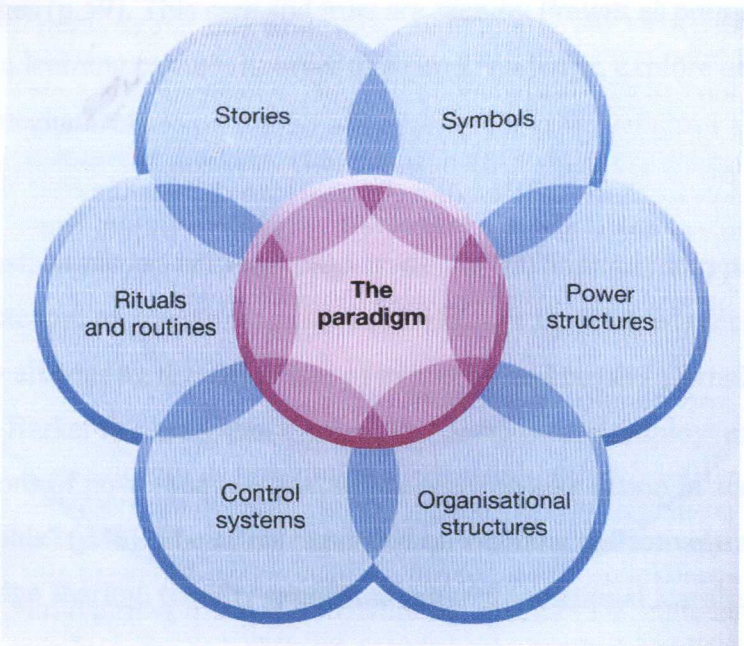


Reproduced from Cameron, K.S. & Quinn, R.E. (1999), *Diagnosing and changing organizational culture*, based on The Competing Values Framework, (pp. 32).

The Competing Values Framework also concentrates on the visible and overt structures and behaviours of organizations, what Schein (1999) describes as *artifacts*. Schein proposes three levels of culture: artifacts, espoused values, and basic underlying assumptions. Espoused values are often formally expressed at an organizational level in the form of Statements of Values and Mission Statements. Basic underlying assumptions are more difficult to analyze; Schein (1999) describes these as “shared mental models that the members of an organization hold and take for granted” (p.21).

Johnson et al (2005) describe this as the Paradigm, at the centre of a ‘cultural web’, (Fig. 2.7. below). The model demonstrates the importance of ‘the way we do things around here’ (rituals and routines), past events and personalities (stories) and infrastructure and language/jargon (symbols). These are as significant in defining a culture as the more obvious, outward facing structures and systems.

**Fig. 2.7. The Cultural Web**



Reproduced from Johnson et al (2005), Exploring Corporate Strategy, p. 202.

Many definitions of organizational learning show the importance of culture. In fact, Weick & Westley (in Denton, 1998) conclude that “conceptualizing organizations as cultures makes it easier to talk about learning” (p.442). Many of the ‘learning disabilities’ listed by

Senge (1990) have their roots in an organisation's culture, for example, the 'culture of blame' (anyone or anything to blame but us) and a focus on short-term events (thus valuing short-term outcomes).

The need for dialogue to instill a learning culture is a recurring theme in the literature (McGill & Slocum, 1993; Prewitt, 2003). Pedler et al (1997) emphasise the importance of participative policy making in learning organizations, in an environment where diversity is embraced, and conflicts can be settled through constant dialogue. Collaboration is enabled through improved trust and mutual respect.

McGill & Slocum distinguish between discussion and dialogue; the latter requires face-to-face meetings to build shared vision, which cannot be achieved through e-mail or dissemination of reports. Prewitt (2003) sees the fostering of interpersonal interactions as a culture-building challenge for larger organizations, and believes that these "social bonds of caring and trust" must be established before being supplemented by technological 'virtual' exchanges (p.59). This care and trust are seen by Prewitt as prerequisites for the development of a learning culture, in order to share knowledge, explore new ideas, and reduce defense mechanisms.

In addition to trust, employee empowerment is seen in the literature as a positive building block for, and outcome of, a learning culture (McHugh et al, 1998; Marsick & Watkins, 2003), positively alleviating the influences of hierarchy and control (Jamali, Khoury & Sahyoun, 2006). Barker & Camarata (1998) state: "Empowered employees overcome internal perceptions of powerlessness and helplessness to take action in accomplishing organizational goals" (p.18). The effort expended on working collectively also creates stronger knowledge sharing, thereby contributing to organizational learning. However, empowerment is seen by some as a chimera at best, and a cynical manipulation at worst (Coopey, 2004), and is related to the political climate of the organization.

Much of the literature on learning organisations places central importance on the role of leaders (Garratt, 1994; Prewitt, 2003, Senge, 2004). Marsick & Watkins (2003) believe a leader's main task is to build a learning climate and culture. Senge describes the creation

of learning organizations as “the leader’s new work” (2004, p.462) and describes three leadership roles; designer, steward and teacher. Most importantly, leaders must demonstrate that they are active participants in the learning process (Marsick & Watkins, 1993; Popper & Lipshitz, 2000).

Koffman & Senge (1995) seek to dispel the ‘myth of the great leader’, which they believe absolves the organization of developing leadership capacities throughout the organizational structure, and reinforces a belief in the group’s powerlessness. Hawkins (1994) emphasises the crucial role of people in the middle of the organization, who straddle the domains of strategy and operations. Critchley & Casey (2004) believe that middle managers should aspire to be ‘catalysts’ for learning and change, a role generally attributed to top managers. The authors give special mention to Local Authorities however, in claiming that top managers struggle to find *any* role, because management teams who are not working together (often deliberately) “deny them any place in the organization at all” (p.496).

#### **2.4.5. Power and Politics**

There is general recognition in the literature that learning processes do not happen in a vacuum, but in a landscape of interests and differential power positions and relations (Betts & Holden, 2003; Reeves & Boreham, 2006). Senge (1990) sees politics as an aberration which destroys learning, because it induces conflict, subverts management strategies, and engenders compliance rather than commitment. Most authors however take a more pragmatic approach. Easterby-Smith, Crossan & Nicolini (2000) see politics as a fundamental aspect and condition of learning, both at the intra and inter-organisational levels, and recommend a more explicit approach to political dynamics. Burnes (2004) believes that power struggles and political infighting are inevitable, and may in fact be seen as part of the creative process. These come to the fore in situations where resources are scarce or organizations are in transition; both these could be seen as ‘normal’ circumstances for the public sector.

Ford (2006) advocates a move from positional power to “reciprocal-relation power” (p.498), a more dynamic and fluid form of power sharing, with less clear demarcation

between superior and subordinate, with mutual accountability. The implication in the literature is that structures and decision making are more ‘democratic’ in learning organizations, though only Pedler et al (1997) use the term specifically.

John Coopey (2000; 2004) is probably the best-known sceptic of the learning organization ideal from a political perspective, arguing that senior management use the language of the learning organization to “create an ideology which helps to ensure competitive advantage and safeguard their own prerogatives, while ensuring the continued obedience of other members” (1994, p.42). Coopey argues that empowerment is impossible whilst senior managers have preferential access to wider knowledge and information, and ultimate control over resource-allocating decisions. In common with most of the literature, Coopey’s arguments are based on a private company perspective. Power and control issues are believed to be particularly potent and challenging in the public sector (Smith & Taylor, 2000; Vince, 2000; Reeves & Boreham, 2006).

## **2. 5. *Assessment of Learning Organisations***

### **2.5.1. Frameworks for Assessment**

DiBella (1995) outlines three approaches for the assessment and development of learning organisations: developmental, capability and normative.

The developmental perspective presupposes that organisations develop as a result of their age, size, experience or life cycle, and that the learning organisation represents a late stage in the organisation’s development (DiBella, 1995). This approach suggests an orderly, constructive progression, and would seem to be contingent on double-loop learning to generate new developments. The concentration here is on organisational rather than individual learning, and insufficient attention is paid to external pressures and internal reorganisations, which are particularly pertinent to public sector organisations.

The capability perspective is based on the idea of core competence, as espoused by Prahalad & Hamel (cited in Starkey & Tempest, 2004). The learning organisation built on



distinctive core competences generates new knowledge through experience, is adaptive at coping with changing circumstances and generative in creating new solutions. Learning is seen to take place naturally, but should be identified and coordinated. However, as Starkey & Tempest (2004) point out, the process of the translation of knowledge into competence and then into action is not clear. In addition, identification of learning abilities and gaps is challenging, and competences can become dysfunctional over time.

The normative perspective presumes that learning as a collective activity takes place under particular circumstances, and that the learning organisation is a matter of strategic choice and management initiative. A framework for 'measuring' and implementing the learning organisation criteria offers some clarity and direction to what is an inherently complex phenomenon, and most models emphasise the need to adopt different emphases to reflect organisational contexts (Senge, 1990; Pedler et al, 1997). A number of authors are critical of the normative approach to learning organisations. Rowley (1998) argues that there is no 'right' model of a learning organisation and criticises the 'cookbook' approach. The normative literature has also been criticised as representing a complex and diffuse set of practices which are inherently difficult to implement, as a "repackaged management consulting process" (Buchanan & Huczynski, 2004, p.135).

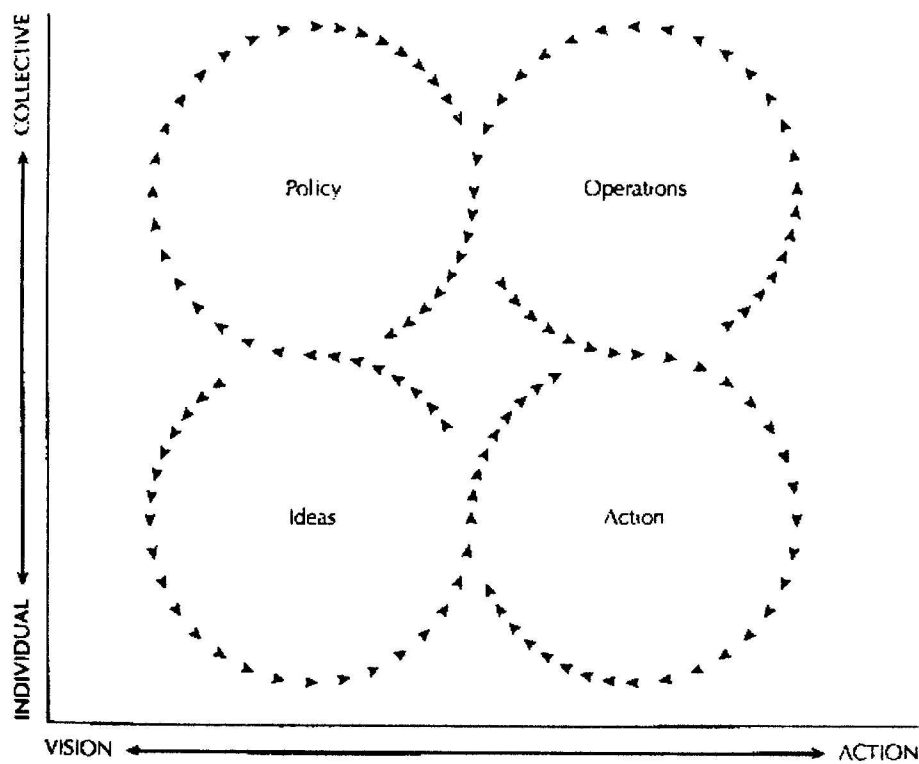
For the purposes of this research a normative perspective has been chosen. It offers a number of comparable frameworks which have been used to create existing research instruments, and provides clear practical guidance in the form of tools and techniques to both assess and deliver the organisation's learning needs. In addition it acknowledges that positive action is required to improve learning processes; this approach is appealing from the point of view of a practitioner-researcher.

### **2.5.2. Tools and Techniques**

Many of the authors writing from a normative perspective offer analytical tools to 'diagnose' and construct their conceptualisation of the learning organisation. Senge has been criticised for the frequently lyrical and visionary prose in his seminal work *The Fifth Discipline* (1990). However, he followed this up with *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook* (1994), which provides exercises, models and real-life case studies from a number of authors, to illustrate and demystify his five learning disciplines.

Pedler et al (1997) advise companies to begin with ‘diagnostic work’ (p.27) and offers a Learning Company Questionnaire, presented in the form of a jigsaw, with the implication that all the 11 elements need to be in place to achieve the ‘big picture’. Scoring across the 11 Characteristics is used to provide a company profile, priority rankings, and dissatisfaction indices. The book recommends a series of group activities to identify the biases and blocks to learning, using their E-Flow model (Fig. 2.8. below), which links the concepts of the learning cycle with organisational double-loop learning, to create a ‘flow’ between ideas and actions, policies and operations. The authors themselves accept that the E-Flow model is creative and intuitive rather than empirically based, “more mandala than model” (p.48). Companies need to find a balance of flow between the four cycles, which can be interrupted by biases and blocks.

**Fig. 2.8.** Pedler et al’s E-Flow Model of the Learning Company



Reproduced from Pedler et al (1997). *The Learning Company*, p.23.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, both Senge and Pedler et al suggest that the diagnostic and planning for learning processes can be improved by the use of external facilitators. The various exercises are also time consuming and therefore costly, and so inconceivable without top management backing and involvement.

Marsick & Watkins' (2003) Dimensions of the Learning Organization Questionnaire (DLOQ) is designed to measure the learning culture of an organisation. Culture is an abstract construct, and is consequently extremely difficult to measure. However, research by Yang (2003) suggests that a learning culture can be accurately inferred through observable behaviours and activities. The 62 questions in the DLOQ purport to measure "important shifts in an organization's climate, culture, systems and structures that influence whether individuals learn" (p.133).

A number of other authors (Denton, 1998; Smith & Taylor, 2000; Phillips, 2003) construct research instruments using existing literature to create criteria against which organisations can be assessed. Smith & Taylor's study is one of only a few conducted with the public sector, and includes issues of public accountability, though it concludes that this was not a particularly strong factor in relation to organisational learning. This research instrument is one of a number which are designed to measure the link between organisational learning characteristics and effectiveness in the form of knowledge and financial performance improvements (Popper & Lipshitz, 2000; Yang, 2003; Kumar & Idris, 2006). Though the overwhelming conclusion is that a link exists, there is still some disagreement (Husyman, 1999) and qualification (Denton, 1998), and the ongoing debate is beyond the scope of this report.

## **2.6. Conclusion**

It has been demonstrated that learning in organisations occurs at the individual, collective and systems-wide levels. There are different emphases in the literature, though most agree that the processes of transfer from individual to collective learning is the most contentious (Dixon, 1994; Vince, 2000), and that systems-wide learning is the most challenging (Denton, 1998). The 'learning organisation' is an organisation which has all the dimensions of organisational learning in place, and even the most prescriptive of authors see it as an almost unachievable ideal in an ongoing process of improving learning capacity (Senge, 1990; Pedler, 1997). In fact, as Pearn, Wood, Fullerton & Roderick state: "the learning organization is not an end state. The whole point is that you never get there." (1994, p. 190).



Using a set of characteristics to describe best practice offers a way of simplifying the complex behaviours in organisational learning. Whilst the range of diagnostic and research techniques discussed here have limitations, and questionnaires in particular are a crude method of capturing what are essentially snapshots of perceptions rather than facts, they are undoubtedly useful to help organisations make sense of a complex set of ideas.

## **2.7. Conceptual Model**

The Conceptual Model developed for the purposes of this research (Fig 2.9, overleaf) is a combination of the models, theories and ideas introduced earlier in this chapter, which provide a framework for answering the research question.

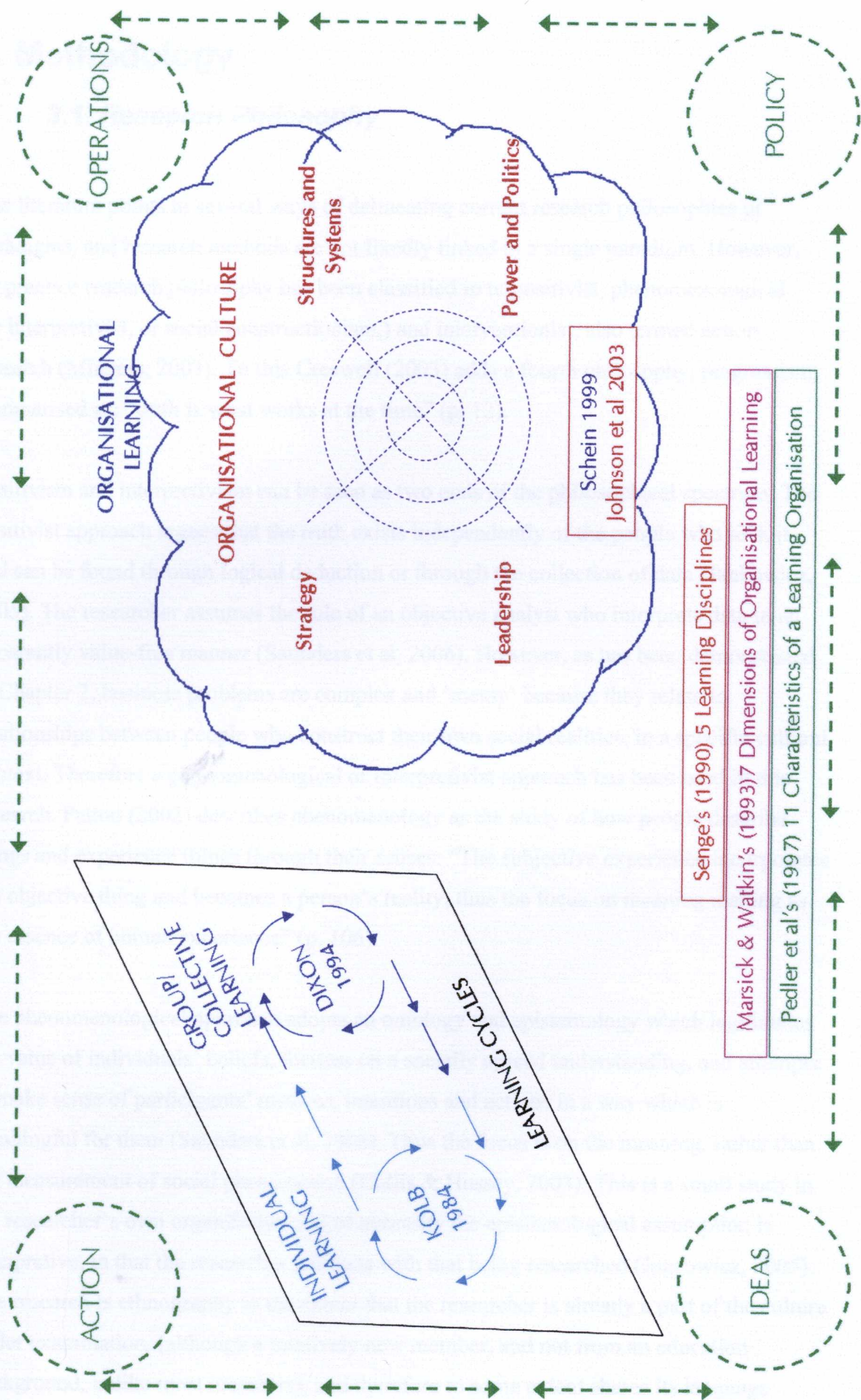
In this model individual and collective learning are linked together through a progressive learning cycle, moving from Kolb's (1984) model of individual learning, to Dixon's (1994) collective learning cycle. The two cycles are linked to demonstrate the two-way process of learning, from individuals to collectives or groups, and vice versa.

Unlike individual and collective learning, organisational learning is not placed in a box, to indicate that it is the both the result of, and impacts on, individual and collective learning, the 'systems thinking' described by Senge (1990). The whole-systems factors which impinge on organisational learning are included within the organisational culture 'cloud', in the form of three concentric circles which represent Schein's (1999) three levels of culture, and incorporate aspects of Johnson et al's (2003) Cultural Web.

Pedler et al's (1997) E-Flow Model is represented in the green arrowed line which joins up the four 'units of energy': ideas, action, operations and policy. The arrows face both ways to suggest a cyclical configuration, demonstrating the inter-dependency of all four factors.

Three specific models are also referred to in the conceptual framework: Senge's (1990) five learning disciplines; Marsick & Watkins' (1993) Seven Dimensions of Organizational Learning and Pedler et al's (1997) 11 Characteristics of a Learning Company. These models have been used to structure the literature review and in the creation of the research instruments, and will be referred to again specifically when the research results are analysed in Chapter 5.





## **3. Methodology**

### ***3.1. Research Philosophy***

The literature points to several ways of delineating current research philosophies or paradigms, and research methods are not fixedly linked to a single paradigm. However, in practice research philosophy has been classified into positivist, phenomenological (or interpretivist, or social constructionism,) and interventionist, also termed action research (Mingers, 2003). To this Creswell (2003) adds a fourth philosophy, pragmatism, summarised as: “truth is what works at the time” (p. 12).

Positivism and interpretivism can be seen as two ends of the philosophical spectrum. The positivist approach argues that the truth exists independently of the people who seek it, and can be found through logical deduction or through the collection of data (Jankowicz, 2005). The researcher assumes the role of an objective analyst who interprets data in an apparently value-free manner (Saunders et al, 2006). However, as has been demonstrated in Chapter 2, business problems are complex and ‘messy’ because they relate to relationships between people who construct their own social realities, in a specific cultural context. Therefore a phenomenological or interpretivist approach has been used in this research. Patton (2002) describes phenomenology as the study of how people describe things and experience things through their senses: “The subjective experience incorporates the objective thing and becomes a person’s reality, thus the focus on meaning making as the essence of human experience” (p. 106).

The phenomenological approach adopts an ontology and epistemology which legitimates the value of individuals’ beliefs, focuses on a socially agreed understanding, and attempts to make sense of participants’ motives, intentions and actions in a way which is meaningful for them (Saunders et al, 2006). Thus the focus is on the meaning, rather than the measurement of social phenomenon (Collis & Hussey, 2003). This is a small study in the researcher’s own organisation and of necessity the epistemological assumption is interpretive, in that the researcher interacts with that being researched (Jankowicz, 2005). The research is ethnography to the extent that the researcher is already a part of the culture under examination, (although a relatively new member, and not from an education background, unlike most members), and therefore to some extent shares its language practice and values. It is acknowledged that the researcher’s own values will determine

what are recognised as facts, and the interpretations which are drawn from them (Collis & Hussey, 2003).

### **3.2. Methodological considerations**

#### **3.2.1. Justification**

The research methodology used here follows from the phenomenological paradigm. The research uses qualitative data, obtained from a small number of respondents; the data is rich and subjective, and is obtained from a natural location, i.e. the workplace (Collis & Hussey, 2003). The research is inductive in nature, being most appropriate to the small size of the study, the qualitative nature of the data to be collected, and the close involvement of the researcher. However, given that existing theoretical frameworks have been used in developing the research instruments, there is also an element of deduction in this research. Creswell (2003) classifies this as a mixed-method approach, combining pre-determined and emerging methods.

Although conducted over a short period of time, the research methodology takes a case study approach, especially suited to its small scale, the limitations in terms of time, cost and accessibility (White, 2000), and to exploring and challenging existing theory (Saunders et al, 2006). The case study approach implies that the research question is important in its own right, and cannot be abstracted from its context (Mingers, 2003). In his review of research methods in the information systems literature, Mingers (2003) follows Yin's earlier categorisation, and places case study methods within the positivist paradigm, arguing that it is just another data collection method. However, the validity of interpretive case study research is widely recognised in the literature (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Lowe, 2002; Saunders et al, 2006). The methodology enables the researcher to gain a rich understanding of the context of the research and the processes being enacted, therefore answering the 'why' as well as the 'what' and 'how' questions (Saunders et al, 2006).

### **3.2.2. Rejected methods**

A positivist methodology using quantitative data was rejected as inappropriate for this research. The research setting was not offered as a 'representative' case, and no statistical generalisations were required, though theoretical generalisations were proposed.

Group interviews were rejected mainly due to issues of practicality, but also because social and political pressures influencing group behaviour as outlined in chapter 2, were likely to impact on the reliability of the information obtained.

Diary methods may have provided a significant amount of data from a multitude of perspectives, from simple activity sampling to record incidences of individual and collective learning, to the possibility of capturing personal reflections and attitudes to the research question (Easterby-Smith et al, 2002). However, this method was rejected as too time consuming and intrusive for respondents, who were unlikely to participate willingly due to work pressures and insufficient personal investment in the research.

Although significant documents were read to provide background information, the possibility of a content analysis of written minutes of the weekly Raising Achievement Service meetings was rejected, due to the brevity and lack of clarity of the documents. Observation of the meetings was rejected due to time constraints, and the possibility of bias caused by the presence of the researcher (who is not a usual member of the meeting).

### **3.3. Research design**

This is a cross-sectional study; data was collected over a short space of time. Although chosen mainly in response to time restraints, it also ensured that chronological changes did not affect the conduct of the research. The study is exploratory in nature, and whilst more time may have added to the reliability of data collected, it would not have increased its generalisability or relevance, beyond the Liverpool context.



The mixed-method design uses both survey (questionnaire) and text (interview) methods in a sequential process, in order to achieve triangulated data, aimed at neutralising biases inherent in a single method (Creswell, 2003). The qualitative approach and exploratory nature of the research question influenced the data collection methods. As the population under investigation was relatively small (54), the advice of White (2000) was followed, and self-completion questionnaires were sent to all (non-administrative) members of the Raising Achievement Service, thus creating a census of the organisation. It was decided not to include two groups in the study – Strategy Consultants and the Music Service – as they have a more ‘detached’ relationship to the Raising Achievement Service and therefore their experiences were unlikely to be representative of the service as a whole. A questionnaire was used in order to reflect the normative frameworks outlined in the learning organisation literature, discussed in Chapter 2, and to inform the questions which were posed during the semi-structured interviews which followed. Pre-existing questionnaires, in particular those developed by Pedler et al (1997) and Marsick & Watkins (2003), were consulted to create the research questionnaire.

In addition to questionnaires, a number of semi-structured interviews were conducted; this allowed the capture of richer detail, and the resolution of any misunderstandings or queries, which can only be achieved through face-to-face contact (Griggs & Hyland, 2003). Semi-structured interviews were chosen to give an overall structure and direction, but with the flexibility to include unstructured questioning. More probing questions can be used, to reach beyond the obvious situation, and attempt to identify root causes (Hair, Babin, Money & Samouel, 2003). It also allows discussion of more confidential or sensitive subject matter (Collis & Hussey, 2003).

Seven members of staff were interviewed; these were chosen on the basis of a combination of purposive and convenience sampling. Respondents to the questionnaire were asked to indicate their willingness to take part in a subsequent interview. Efforts were made to obtain a representative sample covering each of the larger sub-groups or teams in the organisation, including two are Principal Officers. Some were felt to have particular knowledge on the subject on the basis of their position in the organisational hierarchy; others because they were ‘information rich’ and illuminative (Patton, 2002).

The interview technique chosen was also a reflection of the author's own preferences and skills, from a background in social work and team management. The importance of interviewing skills and listening skills are emphasised by Easterby-Smith et al, (2002) as a means of establishing trusting relationships.

Issues of reliability, validity and generalisability were taken in to account in the research design. The use of different data collection methods to achieve triangulation, served to strengthen the reliability of results, as well as increasing the volume of information obtained.

The questionnaire approach permitted a census of the 'core' service, which avoided reliability problems caused by survey methods. Interviews were conducted to add to the richness of data, but, given the small number of interviews conducted, results are open to challenge as being unrepresentative of the organisation. Interviews create possible problems of bias, reliability and validity (White, 2000). The researcher-as-practitioner role can exacerbate this. The interviewee may say things to please the researcher; similarly, concerns around confidentiality may make interviewees wary of expressing honest opinions. Strenuous efforts were made to ensure the personal views of the researcher did not creep in, and to avoid 'leading questions'. A lot of information was generated, and the researcher's own analysis and interpretations are of necessity subjective (White, 2000). However, the breadth and depth of triangulated data obtained meant that validity was increased, and it is believed that the research findings accurately represent what was really happening.

The questionnaire response rate (50%) is above average for self-administered questionnaires, though the variable response across groups does open the research to risks of response bias (White, 2000).

Gummerson (cited in Collis & Hussey, 2003) argues that it is possible to generalise from a very few cases, if the analysis has captured the interactions and characteristics of the phenomenon under study. However, Yin (cited in Griggs & Hyland, 2003) disagrees with this viewpoint, making the analogy that carrying out a number of case studies in the same area is more like doing a number of experiments. They may be complimentary, but do not add up to a 'whole' which can create generalised conclusions. In this case, it may be possible to generalise the research findings to similar departments within the Authority.

However, its applicability to other Local Authority settings must be limited, due to the vast differences in the organisational climate and political environment, as well as the organisational structures. Moreover, it has not been an aim of the research, taking a case study approach, to generalise beyond the specific context.

### **3.4. Construction of the Instrument**

#### **3.4.1. Questionnaire**

The questionnaire (Appendix 2) was designed by the researcher to follow the themes outlined in the literature review. Some of the questions were copied or adapted from the questionnaires developed by Pedler et al (1997), for example questions 2, 26, 28, 29, 31, 32, 41, and Marsick & Watkins (2003), for example, questions 8, 16, 20, 30, 36, 42. It was not considered suitable to simply administer either of these pre-existing questionnaires unchanged, as they do not fully reflect the particular circumstances of the organisation under study.

For example, issues of financial accounting and reward flexibility included in Pedler et al's (1997) questionnaire framework are not as applicable in the public sector. In addition, neither questionnaire adequately reflected the full range of issues outlined in the literature review. This strategy also negated the risk of copyright infringements (Saunders et al, 2006).

As suggested by Hair et al (2003), the questionnaire was split into sections, each beginning with brief instructions for completion, which Jankowicz (2000) terms 'steering'. Though consisting mainly of 'tick box' questions, some open-ended questions were included, to ensure that giving alternatives did not influence the answer, and to encourage 'unaided recall' responses (Hair et al, 2003). This ensured respondents had the opportunity to add their own personal views and feelings (Fisher, 2007). These were used sparingly, as they take more time and effort, both for the respondent to complete, and the researcher to interpret (White, 2000). Hair et al (2003) advise caution in the use of open-ended questions, suggesting that respondents need to be articulate, and willing to spend time giving full answers. However, as Collis & Hussey (2000) point out, where the sampling frame consists of intelligent and knowledgeable people, as is the case here, and where the



research is being conducted in-house, more can be expected of them. Efforts were made to ensure that the questionnaire would take no longer than 15 minutes to complete, as recommended by Saunders et al (2006).

The questionnaires were designed following procedures recommended in the literature, for example, using a combination of (numbered) open and multiple-choice questions presented in a logical order, and leaving more sensitive questions to the end (Collis & Hussey, 2003). Tables were used to reduce the apparent length of the questionnaire without reducing legibility. A five-factor Likert scale was used to indicate the respondent's level of agreement with statements; this allowed a number of different statements to be provided in a small space, and was relatively simple to complete and to analyse (Fisher, 2007). It was felt important to give respondents a 'middle ground' to choose, though this carried risks of eliciting too many 'neutral' responses (Saunders et al, 2006). In Sections 1-3 although most of the statements were positive in nature (in common with existing questionnaires consulted), some negative or ambiguous statements were included (e.g. 21, 22, 31, 37, 38, 45, 46); as well as reverse questions (e.g. 6 & 7, 9 & 10, 39 & 40) and check questions (e.g. 22 & 37, 23 & 26, 36 & 44), all recommended by Jankowicz (2004) and Saunders et al (2006). Collis & Hussey's (2003) 'checklist for eliminating questions' was used to ensure validity (p. 187).

The questionnaire was printed on pale pastel coloured paper, and at the end of the questionnaire respondents were invited to request a summary of the research findings; both factors are reported by Fisher (2007) to increase response rates.

### **3.4.2. Semi-structured interviews**

The themes and questions prepared for the interviews were developed from the review of the learning organisation literature and linked to the main issues arising from the self-administered questionnaire. (Appendix 3). Table 3.1. (overleaf) demonstrates the process of linking the research instruments to the main issues emerging from the literature review, and the analysis of questionnaires. Thirteen questions were chosen and arranged to follow a logical progression from individual to group and then organisational learning, following the format of the literature review.

**Table 3.1. Creation of semi-structured questions**

	ISSUE	QUESTIONNAIRE – QUESTION NUMBER	INTERVIEW QUESTION
1	Self-development (Senge 1990; Pedler et al, 1997)	1, 5, 7.	Do you take personal responsibility for your learning?
2	Experiential learning cycle. Single & double-loop learning (Argyris & Schon 1978; Kolb 1984)	6, 6, 7, 8.	When you try to learn from experience, do you try to look deeper at why you are doing something, as well as how?
3	Formal / informal learning (Marsick & Watkins 1997; Senge 1994)	2, 9, 10.	Learning can be formal and informal. Do you think you should have more/less of either?
4	Group/team clarity of purpose, linked to flexibility (Senge 1994; Pedler et al 1997)	12, 13, 18.	Is your group/team clear about its purpose, and does that purpose change over time?
5	Collective learning cycle. Group/team autonomy to make policy decisions (Dixon 1994; Pedler et al 1007)	14, 16.	How much autonomy /responsibility does your group have to make policy decisions?
6	Working with other groups/networks (Hastings 1993; Reeves & Boreham 2006)	19, 22	Is most of your work undertaken within your group or are you part of other networks?
7	Strategy & continuous improvement (Marsick & Watkins 1993; Pedler et al 1997; Finger & Brand 1998)	24, 25, 27.	With regard to the overall strategy for Raising Achievement, (R.A.) do you think it is evolving as a result of internal and external knowledge/ experience?
8	Strategy – employee involvement (McHugh et al 1998; Jamali et al 2006)	23, 26, 44.	Do you feel you have played a part in the policy and strategy development of R.A?
9	Structures – silo working, networking opportunities, I.T. (Senge 1994; Page et al 2000)	30, 31, 34, 37.	Do you think the systems and structures in R.A. make learning from each other easier or harder?
10	Communication – with each other, teams, senior managers, users (Denton 1998; Smith & Taylor 2000)	28, 29, 35, 36.	Do you think communication is good – e.g. with each other, senior managers, and users?
11	Culture – hierarchy, empowerment, trust/respect (Cameron & Quinn 1999; Schein 1999; Johnson et al 2005; Harrison 2005)	37, 38, 41, 42	Public sector organisations have been characterised as hierarchical, bureaucratic, and with a lack of trust/respect for employees. Do you think this is true of R.A.?
12	Culture - Short-term goals vs. ideas/creativity (Pedler et al 1997; Rashman & Hartley 2002)	39, 40.	Do you believe there is a focus here on short term goals, and if so, what impact does that have on opportunities for creativity and the development of ideas?
13	External & internal politics (Smith & Taylor 2000; Betts & Holden 2003;Coopey 2004)	45, 46.	What impact do you think politics has on the ability of R.A. to be a Learning Organisation?

### **3.5. Research procedures**

#### **3.5.1. Questionnaires**

In order to increase reliability, the questionnaire was desk-checked prior to being piloted by 3 respondents, not part of the Raising Achievement Service. Each respondent was asked to give feedback on layout, clarity, omissions, instructions, sensitivities and completion time, using a brief questionnaire developed by Bell & Opie (2002), as shown in Appendix 4. Results of the pilot showed that two earlier drafts of the questionnaire were too long (9 pages) and too complex (including a diagrammatic exercise). Four of the original 50 questions were highlighted as ambiguous and so were removed.

Questionnaires were accompanied by a covering letter which explained the purpose of the research and gave an explanation of key terms (Appendix 2). The letter emphasised the senior management backing of the research and the potential applicability of the research findings, in an effort to encourage participation. The letter also informed respondents of a 'prize draw' of returned questionnaires, as an additional incentive. Each questionnaire was given a unique reference number to check and follow up non-respondents (Saunders et al, 2006).

Questionnaires were sent out on 2 May 2007. A pre-addressed envelope was provided, with clear instructions for return. On the same day all respondents were sent an e-mail containing the covering letter (Appendix 2), and the questionnaire as an attachment. Respondents were therefore given the choice of whether to complete and return the questionnaire electronically or by hand. It was felt to be important to offer this choice as some of the respondents regularly work from home, so may not pick up the paper copy for some time. Also, the researcher is aware that colleagues in the Raising Achievement Service are more likely to attend to the contents of their e-mail box than their post tray. Respondents were asked to return the questionnaire by 18 May; 20 were received by that date. An electronic reminder was sent out to non-respondents after 14 days, which elicited a further 7 returns by the closing date of 25 May. The return rate for the range of groups was monitored, in an effort to decrease the risk of bias.

### **3.5.2. Semi-structured interviews**

The interview schedule was piloted with two colleagues to check that questions were clear, logically ordered and fit for purpose. As a result, the number of questions was reduced, and questions which encouraged the interviewees to give narrative accounts of learning opportunities were removed, as they proved time consuming and difficult to control. Following the advice of White (2000) and others, the selected interviewees were given a letter in advance of the interviews (Appendix 5), explaining the purpose and general content of the interviews. At the start of the interview the researcher ensured that the purpose of the research was clear, explained how the data was to be used, who would have access to it, and how anonymity would be protected (Page & Ogle, 2006). A time limit was agreed for the interview. It was made clear that the interviewee could decline to answer any question, and could terminate the interview at any point. Care was taken to ensure that the questions were posed in the same way and that respondents understood the questions in the same way. However, the subsequent elaboration of particular issues undoubtedly changed as different aspects of the topic were revealed (Collis & Hussey, 2003).

Interviews were recorded with the permission of interviewees, and subsequently transcribed. As Collis & Hussey (2003) point out, audio recording avoids the automatic screening and summarising of information by the researcher, which can lead to omissions, distortions and bias, where the researcher's own prescriptions act as a filter on the data recorded. Reflections on the main points were put to paper as soon as possible afterwards. Transcriptions of the interviews were analysed and coded to cover relevant issues, following the same broad structure as the questionnaire and thus the literature review. Suitable verbatim quotes were noted for inclusion in the research findings, in order to increase validity (Jankowicz, 2005), and to allow the data to 'speak for itself' (Easterby-Smith et al, 2002).

### **3.6. Ethical considerations**

Saunders et al (2007) describe ethics in the context of research as "the appropriateness of your behaviour in relation to the rights of those who become the subject of your work, or are affected by it" (p.129). Confidentiality or privacy is the cornerstone of the researcher's ethical responsibilities, particularly in interpretivist research: "you are dealing in

information which is value-laden, judgmental, and frequently politically sensitive” (Jancowicz, 2005, p.123). Respondents were given the right not to participate, not to answer any questions, and not to provide data when requested. The researcher obtained permission to quote directly from interviews, and concealed the provenance of particular viewpoints when requested to do so. Anonymity and confidentiality were observed both in relation to discussions with other participants and, wherever possible, during the reporting of the findings. The researcher was particularly aware of the risk of actual or perceived pressure on colleagues to cooperate (Saunders et al, 2006). The researcher was not in a position of organisational authority over any of the respondents.

Permission to use the organisation’s name was obtained following completion of the analysis; senior managers were able to read the work in order to fully understand the context in which the organisation would be named, therefore ensuring that informed consent was given.

### **3.7. Summary**

This chapter has outlined the overall phenomenological research philosophy which has defined the case study methodology chosen for the research. The research design using self-completion questionnaires and semi-structured interviews has been justified, and it has been demonstrated that the research instruments were developed and administered following procedures outlined in the literature. Issues of reliability, validity and generalisability have been addressed in relation to the research question and aims. Limitations of the methodology have been discussed and reference made to ethical considerations. Chapter 4 continues by presenting the findings of the research.

# 4. RESULTS

## 4.1. Introduction

Chapter 4 outlines the findings from the questionnaires and interviews as described in Chapter 3. This chapter is restricted to the presentation and analysis of the collected data; the next chapter will draw conclusions and discuss the findings within the context of the literature outlined in Chapter 2. Questionnaire results for Sections 1-3 (tick-box questions) are reported in full in Appendix 6, which gives both numerical and percentage values. Selected data from Sections 1-4 is illustrated below using appropriate tables, charts and text. All figures below are from a total of 27 respondents. Explanatory, qualitative data from Section 5 of the questionnaire (open-ended questions) is also provided. An analysis of the semi-structured interviews is then outlined, with direct excerpts/quotes included to enrich and expand on the data.

## 4.2. Application of the methodology

### 4.2.1. Response rates

Of the 54 Raising Achievement (R.A.) employees surveyed, a total of 27 questionnaires were returned, giving an overall response rate of 50%. All respondents completed Sections 1-3; one respondent failed to complete Section 4 (underlying learning processes) and three respondents failed to complete Section 5 (open-ended questions). Demographic information (Section 6) was completed to varying degrees; in particular, a number of the questions on ‘number of years in R.A.’ and ‘number of years in the Local Authority’ were not answered or were ambiguous; this may be due to insufficient clarity in the wording of the questions. These results have not therefore been included.

Table 4.1 (overleaf) outlines the response rates broken down by individual groups. The category ‘other’ includes groups/teams of 3 people and under, and people who work largely independently of others. It can be seen that the Learning Network category is the only group significantly under-represented. An analysis of non-respondents indicated there was nothing unusual about them which would affect the validity of the data. The response rate overall is adequate and therefore the research proceeds on the basis that the study is a representative, unbiased piece of research.



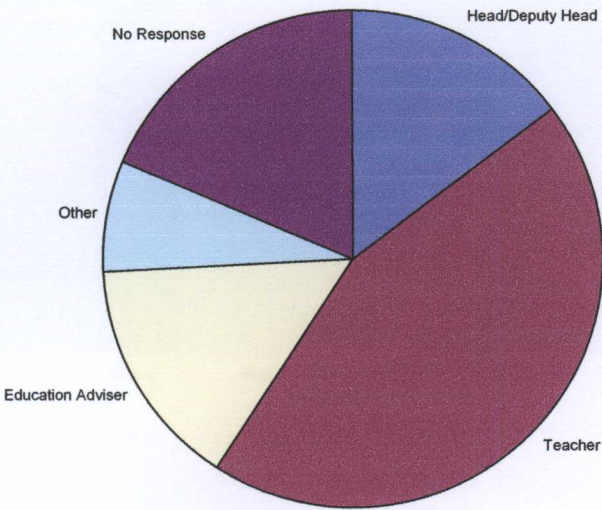
**Table 4.1.** Questionnaire response rate by group.

	Number of questionnaires distributed	Number returned	% of total returned
Leadership Group (Principal Officers)	7	5	71%
Senior Effectiveness Officers	12	6	50%
Learning Network Officers	13	3	23%
EMTAS (Ethnic Minorities & Travellers Achievement Service)	5	2	40%
Inclusion Service	4	2	50%
Healthy Schools Team	4	4	100%
Others	9	5	55%
Totals	54	27	50%

**4.2.3. Characteristics of respondents**

Members of the Liverpool R.A. Service have many years experience in education, mainly in schools, prior to joining the Service. Only two of the 27 respondents came from a non-education background (Chart 4.1. below).

**Chart 4.1.** Previous occupation of R.A. officers



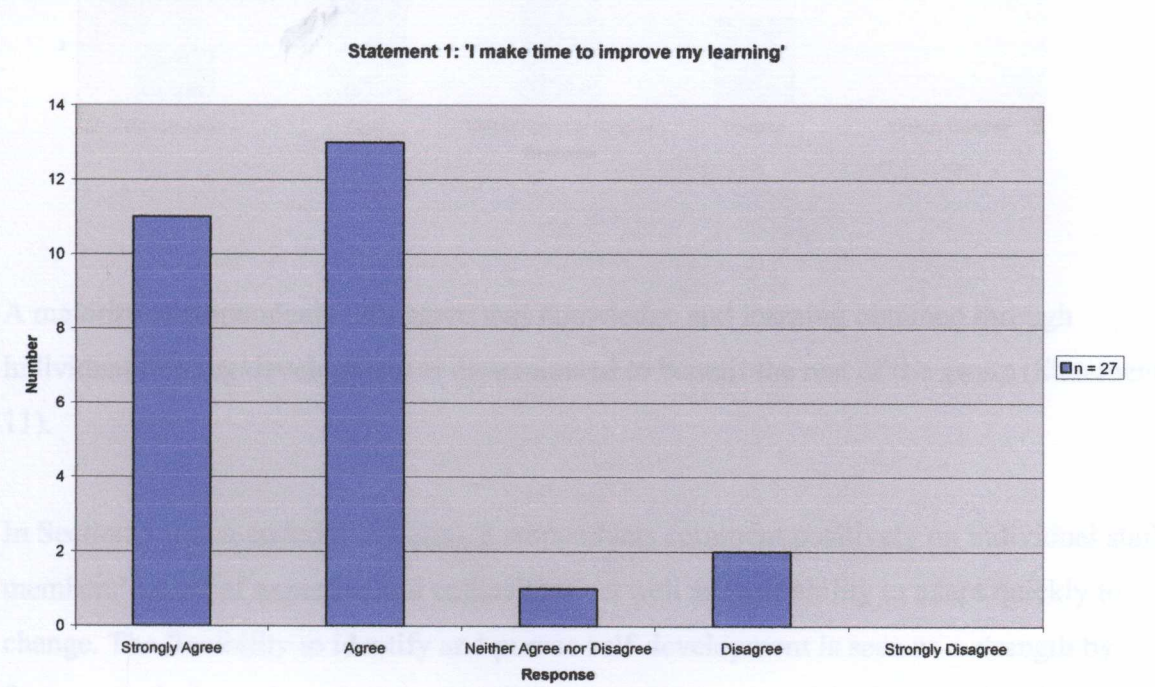
Seven R.A employees were interviewed, four male and three female. Two of the seven are Principal Officers with a significant knowledge of the Service from a senior management viewpoint, dating back to the 1990's. Of the other 5 interviewees, only two have less than five years employment in the R.A. Service, and only one comes from a non-educational background. Interviewees have a range of prior and current experience, spanning different groups and job roles in R.A., and therefore are as representative as possible of the Service as a whole.

### 4.3. Findings from the questionnaires

#### 4.3.1. Section 1 – Individual learning

Eleven statements were included in Section 1, and the responses are outlined in full in Appendix 6. In relation to the importance given to individual learning and self-development (Statement 1), 24 respondents report that they make time to improve their learning (Chart 4.2. below).

**Chart 4.2.** Statement 1: 'I make time to improve my learning.'

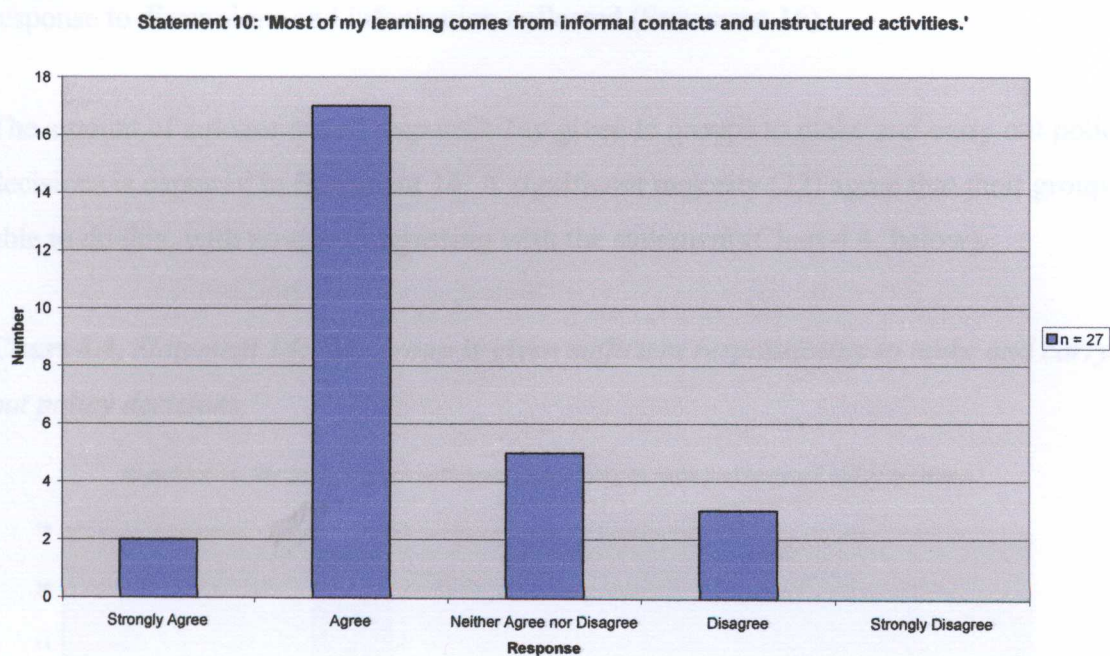


Most respondents agree that training/development is preceded by identification of learning needs (Statement 3), though there is less agreement that there is subsequent analysis of whether these needs have been met (Statement 4).



The importance of learning by reflecting on experience is acknowledged by most respondents (Statement 7: 24 agreed or strongly agreed), in a context where planning and acting quickly are the norm (Statement 6). With regard to the source of learning, 19 respondents agree that most of their learning comes from informal and unstructured activities, rather than formal training (Chart 4.3. below).

**Chart 4.3.** *Statement 10: ‘Most of my learning comes from informal contacts and unstructured activities’.*



A majority of respondents (20) agree that knowledge and learning obtained through individual training/development is disseminated to benefit the rest of the group (Statement 11).

In Section 5 (open-ended questions), 8 respondents comment positively on individual staff members' levels of expertise and enthusiasm, as well as their ability to adapt quickly to change. The flexibility to identify and pursue self-development is seen as a strength by four respondents, and good professional development opportunities by a further four respondents. However, lack of time and opportunity for learning are highlighted by three respondents, and one reported: "you're just expected to get on with the job".

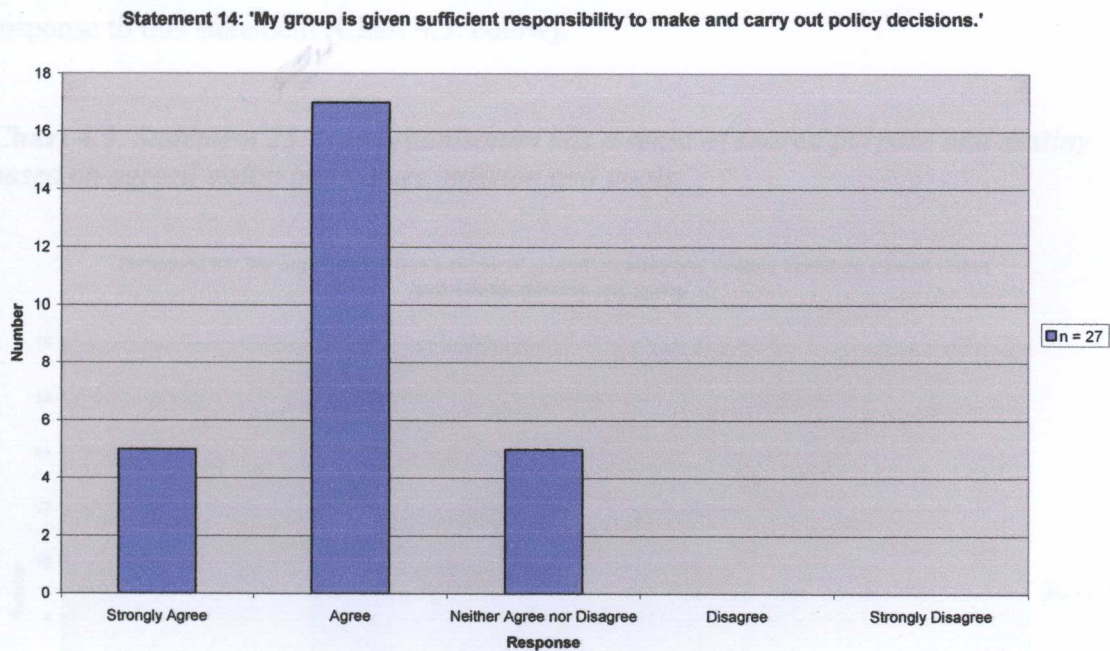
### 4.3.2. Section 2 - Collective (group/team) learning

Eleven statements were included in Section 1, and the responses are outlined in full in Appendix 6.

A majority (25) of respondents report that their group shares the organisation’s vision and values (Statement 12) and that their group is clear about its purpose and goals (Statement 13). Most respondents (22) confirm that their group is given responsibility to make and carry out policy decisions (Statement 14), and that the group’s thinking is adapted in response to discussions and information collected (Statement 16).

The amount of autonomy and responsibility given to groups to make and carry out policy decisions is captured in Statement 14. A significant majority (22) agree that their group is able to do this, with no-one disagreeing with the statement (Chart 4.4. below).

**Chart 4.4.** *Statement 14: ‘My group is given sufficient responsibility to make and carry out policy decisions.’*



Respondents’ views of their group are overwhelmingly positive. A total of 24 respondents agree that their group focuses not just on the task but on how well the group is working (Statement 15). Most (23) agreed with Statement 18, that their group is fluid and functional as required. They share strong social bonds of caring and trust, in an egalitarian



and non-bureaucratic culture (Statements 17, 20, 22). Knowledge is generally shared with the group (Statement 21) and with other groups in the organisation (Statement 19).

In Section 5 (open-ended questions) flexible and supportive teams are seen as a particular strength for four respondents, alongside the participation in other groups, project and activity based. Two respondents comment that there is insufficient time to pass on individual excellence to other members of the team.

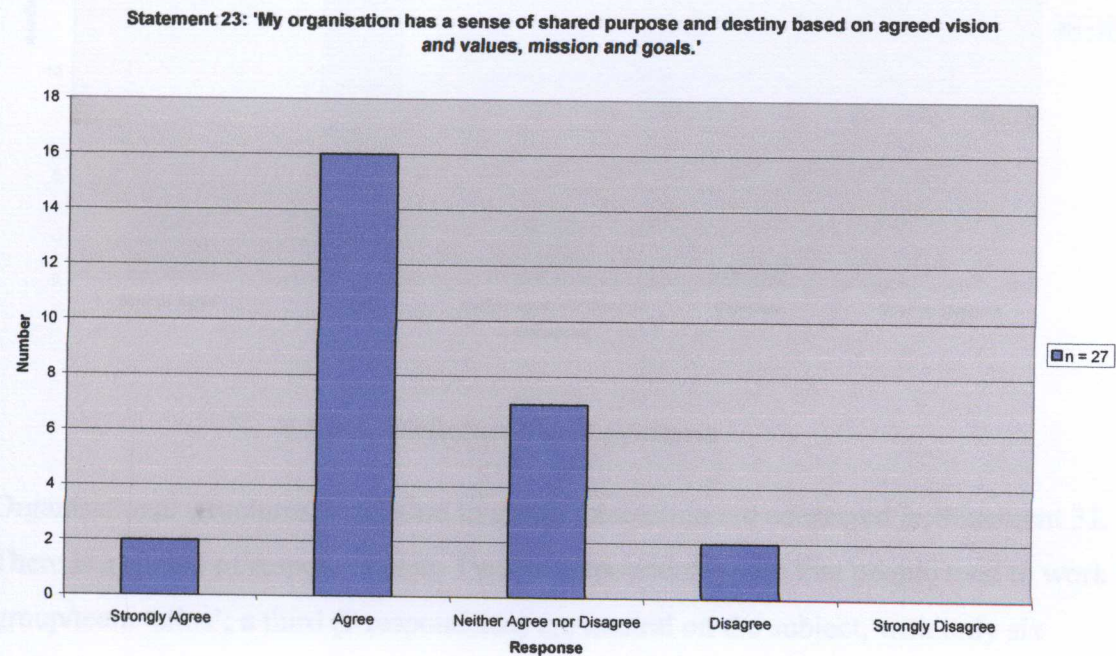
### 4.3.3. Section 3 – Organisational learning

A total of 24 statements were included in Section 1, and the responses are outlined in full in Appendix 6.

#### 4.3.3.1. Strategy

In relation to strategy, most respondents (18) agree that the organisation had a sense of shared purpose (Statement 23), though a third of respondents give a neutral or negative response to this statement (Chart 4.5. below).

**Chart 4.5.** *Statement 23: 'My organisation has a sense of shared purpose and destiny based on agreed vision and values, mission and goals.'*

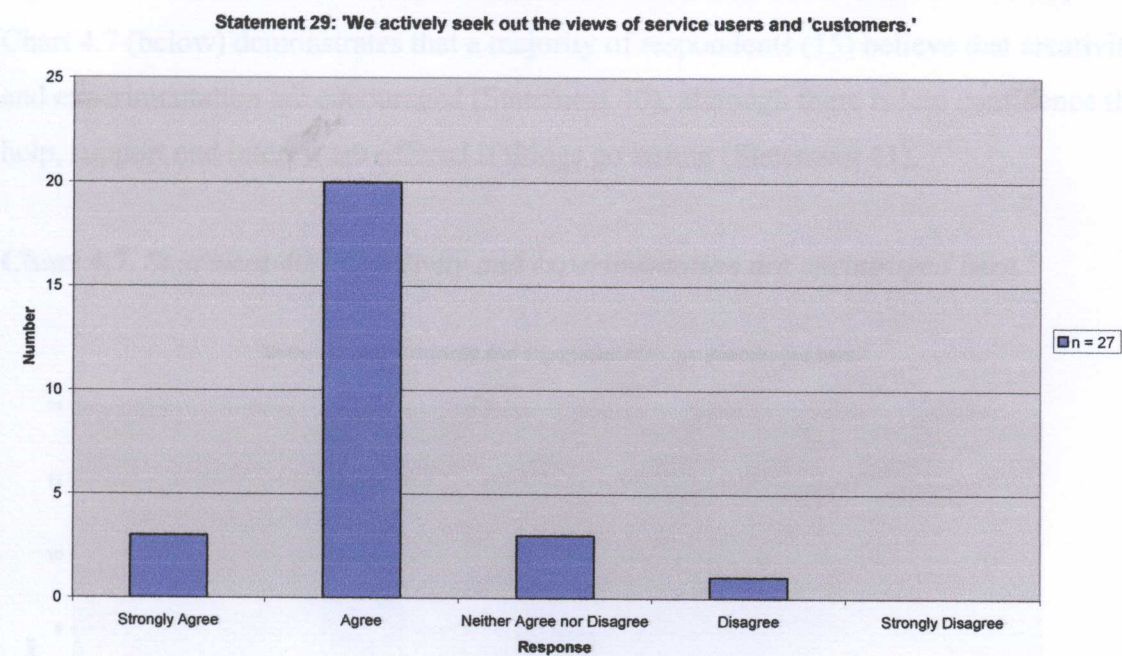


Following on from this, the level of employee involvement in policy and strategy formation (Statement 26) elicits a more mixed response, with 8 respondents agreeing that all members of the organisation are able to be involved, and 9 respondents disagreeing. Around a third of respondents give a neutral response.

Although most respondents (23) agree that policies are modified over time (Statement 25), there is less agreement (9) that experiments and feedback loops are built in to the planning process (Statement 24). This appears to contrast with the response to Statement 27, where most respondents (21) agree that there are built-in mechanisms for monitoring and review.

Links with other ‘stakeholders’ are the subject of Statement 29, specifically whether the views of service users are actively sought. A significant majority (23) agree with the statement, with only one respondent in disagreement (Chart 4.6. below).

**Chart 4.6.** Statement 29: ‘We actively seek out the views of service users and ‘customers’.



4.3.3.2. Structures and systems

Organisational structures in relation to group interaction are addressed in Statement 31. There is a spread of responses here. Twelve respondents agree that people tend to work in group/team ‘silos’; a third (9 respondents) are neutral on the subject, with only six respondents in disagreement.



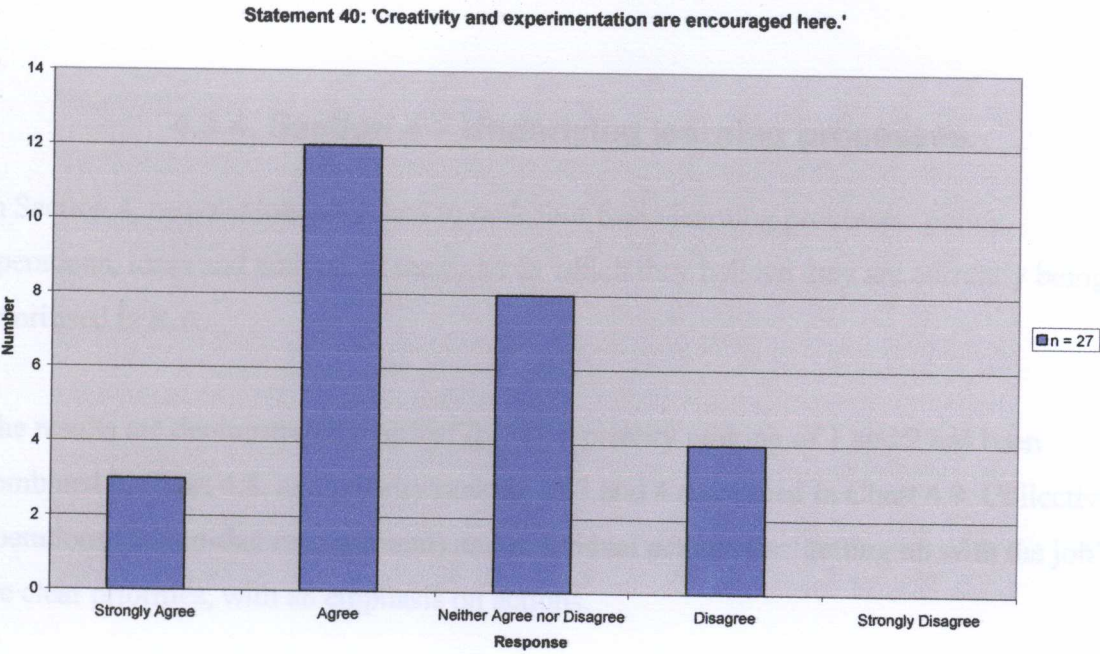
Although I.T. is acknowledged by most respondents to be a way of creating and disseminating information (Statements 32, 33), there is less agreement about the local intranet system, with only 11 respondents agreeing that it is a reliable and effective way of communicating with colleagues (Statement 34). The theme of communication is addressed further in Statement 35. There is a polarity of responses, with 11 respondents agreeing it is easy to meet face to face with colleagues, but thirteen disagreeing.

4.3.3.3. Culture and leadership

Statements on organisational culture and leadership elicit the widest range of responses, with the highest number of 'neutral' responses. 5 respondents agree that organisational rules and procedures are fairly rigid (Statement 37), but 8 respondents disagree with the statement. Although 12 respondents agree there is a definite demarcation between senior managers and others (Statement 38), 15 respondents believe there are good mechanisms for two-way communication (Statement 36).

Chart 4.7 (below) demonstrates that a majority of respondents (15) believe that creativity and experimentation are encouraged (Statement 40), although there is less confidence that help, support and interest are offered if things go wrong (Statement 41).

Chart 4.7. Statement 40: 'Creativity and experimentation are encouraged here.'



Whilst 12 respondents agree that there is a culture of trust and mutual respect in the organisation (Statement 42), there is a high number of neutral responses (10), and 5 disagree. A similar breadth of responses is elicited from Statement 43: 'senior managers see the importance of learning for themselves and others', and Statement 44: 'senior managers promote shared policy and decision making'.

**4.3.3.4. Power and politics**

A majority of respondents (14) agree that external power and politics make it difficult to promote and sustain learning (Statement 45), with a slightly smaller number agreeing that internal power and politics have the same effect (Statement 46).

With regard to views on organisational learning expressed in Section 5 (open-ended questions), strengths include shared understanding of aims and objectives (2), collaborative learning opportunities (2) and good information flow (2). Weaknesses expressed include a lack of communication with each other to share good practice (12), lack of shared vision (5), buildings and job roles which hamper communication (6), and the prevailing anxiety / threat linked to job losses (6). Suggested improvements are: improved links and understanding between R.A. and the wider Children's agenda / Children's Services (8), better job security (7), a more strategic approach to learning (5) and better systems for communication with each other (4).

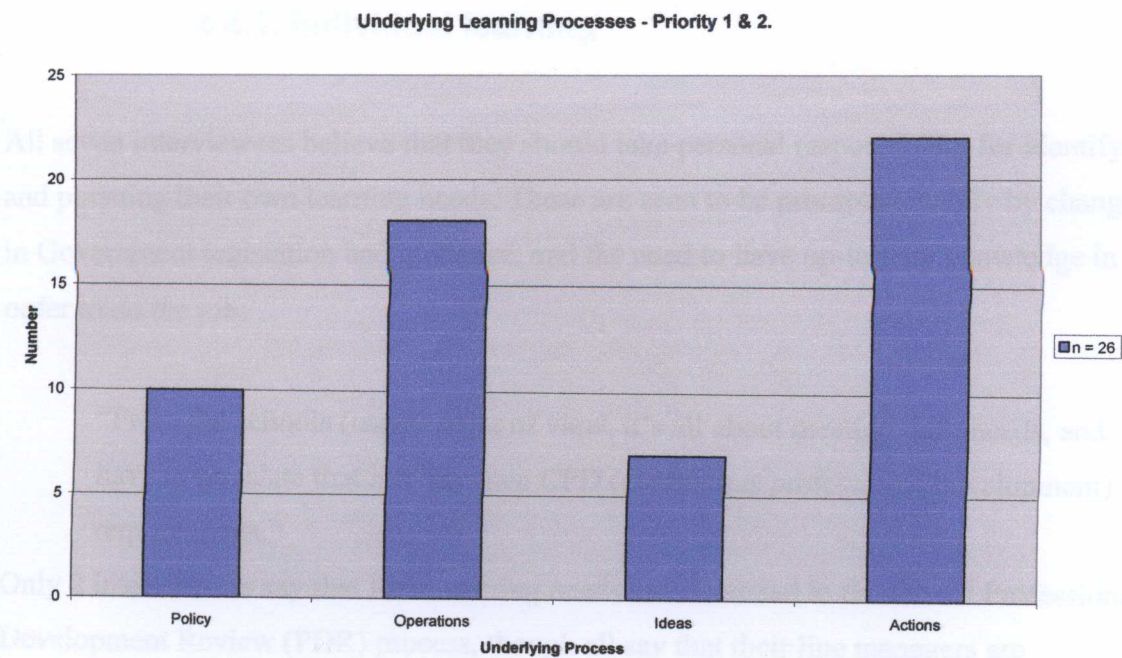
**4.3.4. Section 4 – Underlying learning processes**

In Section 4, respondents are asked to rank four basic learning processes: policy, operations, ideas and actions, in the order in which they believe they are currently being prioritised in R.A.

The results are demonstrated overleaf (p.54): a priority ranking of 1 and 2 has been combined in Chart 4.8, and priority ranking of 3 and 4 combined in Chart 4.9. Collective operations (day-to-day management) and individual actions (or 'getting on with the job') are clear priorities, with an emphasis on actions.

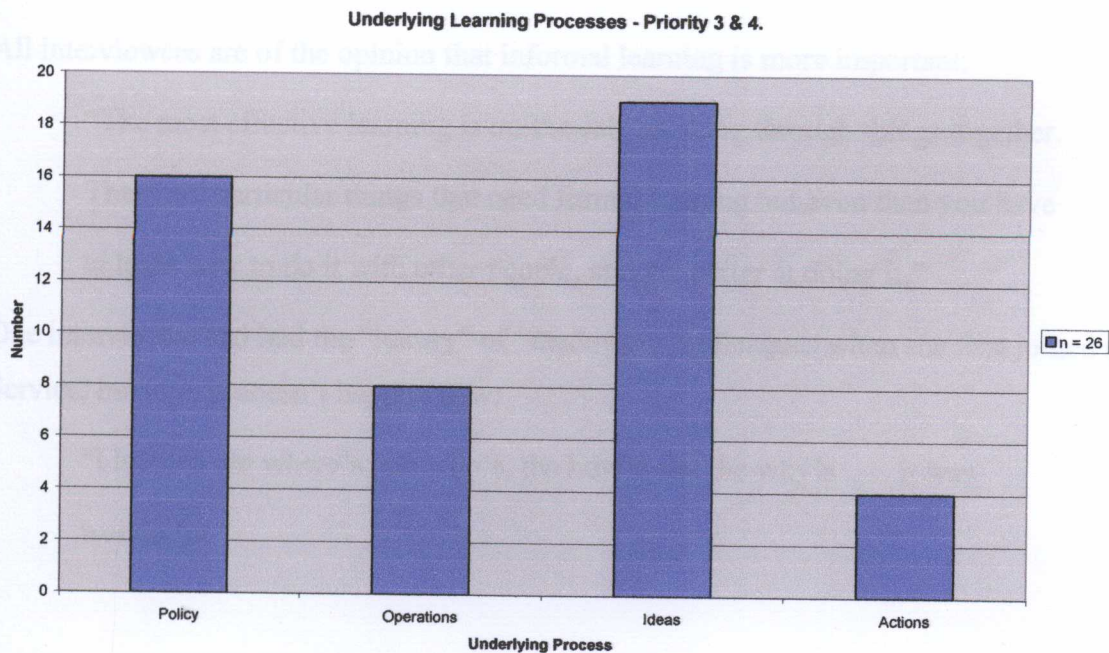


**Chart 4.8.** Underlying learning processes – Respondents’ priority ranking 1 & 2



Policy (the overall strategic vision and direction) is seen as a lesser priority, with individual ideas (and creativity) given the lowest priority of all (Chart 4.9 below).

**Chart 4.9.** Underlying learning processes – Respondents’ priority ranking 3 & 4



## **4.4. Findings from the semi-structured interviews**

### **4.4.1. Individual learning**

All seven interviewees believe that they should take personal responsibility for identifying and pursuing their own learning needs. These are seen to be prompted mainly by changes in Government legislation and guidance, and the need to have up-to-date knowledge in order to do the job:

“From the schools (users) point of view, it’s all about meeting their needs, and I have to translate that into my own CPD (continuous professional development) requirements.”

Only 2 interviewees say that their learning needs are discussed in the formal Professional Development Review (PDR) process, though all say that their line managers are supportive in consenting to formal learning opportunities as they arise, and that funding is generally available to access such training and development. There is however a lack of clarity around the role of the L.A. Learning and Development service, and 4 interviewees feel that accessing training is unnecessarily cumbersome and off-putting, and that the training is not always ‘fit for purpose.’

All interviewees are of the opinion that informal learning is more important:

“The most effective learning is on-the-job, working through things together.

There are particular things that need formal training but even then you have to learn how to do it with other people, and get better at doing it.”

One interviewee had had the “luxury” of ‘shadowing’ colleagues when she first joined the Service, but says it doesn’t happen now:

“I learned the where’s, the who’s, the how’s and the why’s ..... it was wonderful.”

In relation to individual reflection on and learning from experience, all interviewees state that they try hard to do this, though lack of time militates against it:



“The people in the organization are very good at learning, but sometimes the problem is that on a daily basis we’re just firefighting.”

Three interviewees acknowledge that they find it difficult personally to stop and examine their own practice:

“What we tend to do is dive headlong in to something without stopping to think.

Is that a R.A. thing, or a human thing?”

Looking deeper into why we do things rather than just how, is seen as even more problematic. All interviewees feel they are getting better at it, in a climate that demands evidence of impact not just output. However some individuals believe that the ‘why’ thinking is done for us at a higher level, and one interviewee states the view that:

“looking deeper into issues is futile ....because the organization we work for doesn’t want us to do that.”

Another interviewee explains that it is difficult to be open and honest about mistakes in an environment where you may be competing with others for jobs, and where your own survival may depend on “talking something up.”

#### **4.4.2. Collective (group) learning**

Interviewees are part of different group structures, ranging from closely knit teams to loosely coupled individuals. Whilst ‘teamworking’ is seen as supportive and an opportunity for learning, this is not always easy to achieve. Practical issues of finding the time and venue to meet are mentioned by four interviewees:

“We try to find time to meet weekly, but something often intervenes .... and we haven’t the budget to book a meeting room, so it ends up feeling too informal .... we don’t prepare enough for it.”

All but one interviewee believes that their group is clear about its purpose, with the group’s vision and values remaining constant in a context of changing national priorities. The recent changes in funding arrangements which puts the future of the R.A. service in the hands of schools, has forced them to focus not just on the task, but also on how well they are working as a group:

“We have to ask, what impact are we making, could we do it better .... We have to prove ourselves now, and schools have to weigh up if we’re worth the money”.

Within the framework of national legislation and targets, and the local Children's and Young People's Plan, most interviewees feel that their group is given sufficient responsibility and autonomy to 'make things work', though at a practical rather than a policy level lower down the R.A. hierarchy:

"If somebody says 'we should do this', somebody will say 'go on then, do it' ....there are opportunities for people who want to take us towards new horizons. It's always been like that in Liverpool education."

Much of the more innovative work is done by R.A. officers working in a multi-agency context, and all but one interviewee have developed extensive networks beyond the education context. This has opened up new perspectives and opportunities for learning for R.A. officers whose experience has been more restricted:

"We're largely from an older generation, we're all from education, and most of us haven't worked anywhere apart from Liverpool .... that can restrict our outlook."

Learning has taken place through multi-agency training, but mostly through informal networking. The challenge for most interviewees is to pass that learning on to R.A. colleagues, in their own groups and beyond. Time and opportunity are again the issues raised. The fortnightly R.A. briefing meetings for team managers, Senior Effectiveness Officers and above, are seen as having limited use in sharing learning: one interviewee describes it as "people showing off" rather than sharing honest debate. Nor are the contents of the meetings always shared with group members; one says:

"I have no idea what goes on in the briefing meetings .... My line manager goes sometimes but it doesn't occur to him to give me any feedback, he's just too busy."

### **4.4.3. Organisational learning**

#### **4.4.3.1. Strategy**

Five of the seven interviewees are unclear about the current vision and strategy of the R.A. Service:

"We're fumbling our way to something that hopefully will be good, rather than planning for a future of constant change; it's about technology, demographics, work-based learning, community cohesion .... we're getting bogged down in a budget debate – what will you pay for – rather than presenting a vision for the future."

The move from Education to an integrated Children's Service is also seen as a challenge which hasn't been sufficiently acknowledged at a national or local level, and learning has been lost as senior managers retire or move on. The widening objectives of the R.A. Service, from 'raising standards' in 1999, to the all-embracing 'Every Child Matters' agenda, has added complexity and confusion at all levels.

Nor can it be assumed that all employees are ready to change. One interviewee says:

"I could understand it when things weren't so joined up .... now it's all-encompassing, too big and unfocussed. Laudable, but doomed to failure."

There is general agreement that now is a good time to 'take stock' and look at the strategy and direction of the Service, in the new multi-agency context. All but two interviewees believe there are opportunities to contribute to this wider debate, though communication upwards is seen as more active than that downwards:

"Yes, people have a voice, but it needs to be louder .... if you're not asked things then after a while you stop trying to get noticed."

Principal Officers (PO's) are singled out by many as good communicators:

"Our PO's really know the picture, and listen to us .... they know strategically what needs to happen."

The recent reintroduction of Director's Portfolio Briefings, taking place at peoples' workplaces, are seen by some interviewees as evidence that the need to communicate a clearer vision has been acknowledged. However, two interviewees feel that their views would not be welcomed, and would be interpreted as obstructive rather than constructively critical.

Four interviewees comment that organizationally we miss opportunities to adapt policy in the light of experience, as we are not good enough at capturing learning from even the largest, most costly programmes, for example the Behaviour Improvement Programme, and the Learning Networks. This is been highlighted as an issue for the forthcoming Joint Area Review:

"We don't know if or why something works .... We don't measure indicators along the way .... That means that the bigger organization is not learning as effectively as it might, and because of that, R.A. isn't learning as effectively as it might."

#### **4.4.3.2. Structures and systems**

There is overall dissatisfaction with the structures and systems within R.A. in relation to the promotion of learning. Fortnightly R.A. Briefing meetings are seen by most of the interviewees who attend as lacking in focus and direction, and disconnected from internal and service-wide systems of planning and communication:

“Back in 2000 there was an explicit sequence, structures and routines including regular meetings and briefings, so the flow through of information and ideas would trickle down and responses would go up .... that was an expectation.”

Most interviewees believe that active efforts are made to seek out the views of service users and ‘customers’. Most also say that they endeavour to learn from other services and authorities, and can cite examples of how they have shared their knowledge and experience, both formally at conferences and training, and through more informal regional networking.

However the continuing existence of ‘silo working’ within the Service is commented on by 5 of the interviewees. Most agree that there is insufficient dialogue between groups in R.A., and this can lead to a duplication of effort as well as a loss of learning, and a ‘disjointed’ impression given to service users. Separate funding streams and budget arrangements are felt to contribute to the inflexibility and ‘silo mentality’.

The fixed nature of peoples’ roles and responsibilities is seen as a major barrier to learning by 3 interviewees, though all 3 believe that the skills, resources and policy framework are available to create more flexible, issue-focused roles and structures. The Learning Networks are offered by two interviewees as an example of how this can be achieved:

“there’s someone in the centre but you can quickly reconfigure, so if it’s all about attendance you can reconfigure to get a project management team that can really hammer attendance, if the funding and the need are there .... and then you can reconfigure again if the focus is on the neighbourhoods.”

As well as the geographical separation of senior managers from the rest, working conditions for 5 interviewees are believed to impede communication and learning. The

lack of freely available meeting rooms, the system of ‘hot-desking’, poor equipment and inadequate storage space, causes frustration and wasted time:

“How can I work effectively and learn and develop myself .... under these conditions .... machines don’t work, I can’t find anything .... It’s the biggest block to everything I do.”

The increasing tendency of some employees to work at home is seen as a negative outcome of this by most interviewees.

The Information Technology (I.T.) system is seen as reliable and well supported centrally by most interviewees. Access to the intranet and world wide web, both in the office and through Blackberries and remote access, ensure the constant availability of information and knowledge. The lack of configuration between the Education and Social Care ‘shared areas’ is commented on by 2 interviewees, and all acknowledge a lack of proper understanding about just what is now available:

“It’s like .... if we were flying an aircraft, somebody has changed the cockpit. It’s much better, but no-one’s told me what the different bits do.”

One interviewee talked of the untapped potential of the I.T. system, for ‘chat-room’ communication, as a source of ‘blended learning’ and an aid to self-directed learning.

All interviewees agree that electronic communication is no substitute for face to face contact with colleagues, which can be problematic for reasons already stated.

Communication with line managers and PO’s is seen by all interviewees as good or excellent, within the aforementioned constraints of time and geography:

“They’re all good people .... The organization is packed with skilled, committed individuals, and that’s why we turned around after 1999.”

#### **4.4.3.3. Culture and leadership**

All the interviewees see the R.A. Service as a ‘typical’ public sector organization, hierarchical and bureaucratic in its systems and structures. However, attempts to flatten the hierarchy post-1999 are acknowledged by some, and the greater autonomy and responsibility which ensued has clearly been both challenging and rewarding:

“Before then, there was a lot of delegating responsibility upwards .... (after 1999) there was a deliberate turn-about to more decision-making downwards, and for some this was a difficult learning experience.”

Two of the interviewees describe an entrenched hierarchical system:

“This non-inclusive, non-open culture is an institutional problem. As individuals, people might be surprised to hear that because as people they’re OK, but institutionally that’s not the case.”

It is clear that interviewees’ judgment on the hierarchy is greatly dependent on their personal experiences and contact with senior managers. One said:

“I can e-mail (Director, P.O.) and I’ll always get a reply .... They’ll listen and support you .... It’s not about us and them like it used to be, I used to feel intimidated but not now.”

Most R.A. employees are in a position of seniority which presupposes a degree of confidence and authority as well as good communication skills. All but one interviewee say they are unafraid to express their opinion, if the circumstances arise. However the two ‘newest’ interviewees were more cautious; one states:

“I don’t know her (Assistant Executive Director) and she doesn’t know me .... I’d be very wary of what I said to her.”

Feelings of trust and empowerment are being eroded by the current anxiety about possible job cuts, it’s a time when you should “keep your head down” rather than “play off the board”, in case you are blamed personally for things that go wrong. This eroded trust is believed by a number of interviewees to be exacerbated by a perceived lack of understanding by senior managers. Making personal connections with staff is seen as important by all interviewees:

“People at the top need to take the time to be seen .... wander around, talk to people, take the temperature .... you have to do more of that in a time of change.”

Most interviewees disagree that R.A. focuses on short-term goals, though there is increasing political pressure to do so, with the drive towards targets and quantifiable results:

“Education has always been a long-term business .... no-one expects or requires quick fixes.”

*However, the short term school inspection cycles are impacting on the demands schools are making of the R.A. Service.*

The concentration on operations and actions which is highlighted in Section 4 of the questionnaire, is reiterated by all interviewees, though some feel this is a more recent phenomenon:

“The creativity is here and the opportunity is here, when we have a chance to stop for a breath .... every team meeting, someone has an idea.”

#### **4.4.3.4. Power and Politics**

The national political agenda is transforming the whole future of the R.A. Service, and will impact further as funding and power moves to local neighbourhood management structures. The potential loss of expertise and learning as people leave, and as posts are ‘deleted’, is seen as a significant problem by all interviewees, and there is anxiety that the Service is not being equipped to learn about these new ways of working.

Local political interference (a criticism of the 1999 Ofsted) is seen as ever-present, though to a lesser extent than in the past. One interviewee says:

“We’ve got to be all things to all men – you need to be politically sensitive and astute. If a councillor rings up, it’s important and you have to jump. Politicians interfere because they can .... and we feed them.”

Most interviewees feel that the organization and its political masters should work harder to acknowledge and celebrate success rather than concentrate on ‘failures’ and problems:

“We operate a system of exception reporting .... We’re only ever questioned about things that have gone wrong.”

### **4.5. Summary**

This chapter has presented summarized and highlighted results from both the self-administered questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews, across the areas of individual, group and organisational learning. Complete results from the questionnaire are outlined in Appendix 5. These results will now be examined in the context of the literature review, and key conclusions will be drawn

## **5. Conclusions and implications**

### ***5.1. Introduction***

This chapter brings together the findings outlined in Chapter 4 and demonstrates how they contribute to the body of knowledge about learning organisations and organisational learning, which was outlined in Chapter 2. In doing so it will answer the research question and satisfy the final research aim.

The chapter begins with a critical evaluation of the adopted methodology then go on to draw conclusions about the research aims in the light of the literature, making direct links between the research findings and the range of existing research. Implications for further understanding of the research question are then explored, with suggested opportunities for further research.

### ***5.2. Critical evaluation of adopted methodology***

The adoption of a phenomenological approach was appropriate to the research question, given the complex nature of business and the subjective experiences and beliefs of the people within it. The combination of inductive and deductive methods allowed the researcher to use existing theoretical frameworks to develop the research instrument, but not to be bound by any one of them.

The combination of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews produced triangulated data which provided a mix of wide-ranging and in-depth insights into the research question. However, the adopted methodology can be criticized for those very reasons. The breadth and richness of data created difficulties in the selection and summarizing of the most pertinent data. This lays the research open to criticism of bias and subjectivity, risks which were already present given the practitioner-researcher dimension. Whilst it may have been advisable to change the research process and conduct the interviews first, in order to use the outcomes to focus the content of the questionnaire, this too could have resulted in bias and threats to validity.

The research instruments also proved to be flawed to some extent. Although the questionnaire was thoroughly piloted before distribution, it subsequently became clear that



the demographic questions in Section 6 were badly worded and therefore the results were ambiguous. As a consequence the data was not used, as it is important not to present or analyse information which may be misleading. In Sections 1-3, the inclusion on the Likert scale of a middle or 'neutral' option carried the risk that respondents would 'opt out' of giving more definite (particularly negative) answers to more controversial questions. This may well have been the case, given the more critical content of the semi-structured interviews. The length of the questionnaire may also have had an impact on the level of returns (50%), though there is no specific evidence that this is the case.

The interviews were conducted without problems and in accordance with the procedures and ethical considerations outlined in Chapter 3. They provided a wide range of illuminating data which was coded and categorised, not all of which can be included in this report. From the totality of the information collected, particular points were chosen to discuss in more detail.

However, despite the provisos stated above, the methodology was largely sound, and provided reliable and meaningful data which meets the research aims. These will now be addressed, as links are made between the data and existing literature.

### ***5.3. Conclusions about the research aims***

In order to answer the research question: 'An assessment of the Liverpool City Council Raising Achievement Service as a learning organisation', there were four aims. Aim one, 'to critically review contemporary thinking on learning organizations and organizational learning' is achieved in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology used to capture the raw data described in Chapter 4, which will now be analysed in more detail, to answer aim two, 'to assess the extent to which the Liverpool City Council Raising Achievement Service is functioning as a learning organisation' and aim three, 'to compare and contrast the findings of aims one and two'.

The analysis will examine in turn the three main constituent parts of organizational learning which are set out in the conceptual model (Fig 2.9, p. 33), by looking at individual then collective/group learning, before moving to systems-wide learning.

Reference is made throughout to existing models and frameworks referred to in Chapter 2 and used to create the research instruments and conceptual model.

### **5.3.1. Individual learning**

R.A. employees appear to demonstrate the ‘drive’ to learn described by Dixon (1994), and make time to improve their learning, primarily focusing on keeping their knowledge up to date, in order to do their job effectively. Although formal learning is identified as one way of improving knowledge, it is not as dominant as suggested by Betts and Holden (2003). There was no evidence to support Harrison’s (2005) conclusions that funding for training is diminishing, though interviewees express some dissatisfaction with the training and development opportunities offered by the learning and development service, around relevance and access. However, the majority of respondents take the view that most of their learning comes from informal contacts and unstructured activities rather than formal training, in line with work by Marsick & Watkins (1997).

Although individual learning opportunities, identified as important by Marsick & Watkins (2003), are available, the identification and pursuit of these opportunities is seen by interviewees as primarily their own ongoing responsibility, rather than a formal part of the appraisal system. This is however, seen by interviewees as a positive situation, and appears to contradict Blackman & Henderson’s (2005) research that the individually tailored nature of learning is usually lost by being dependent on formal review systems. Interviewees demonstrated evidence of what Senge describes as ‘personal mastery’ which is very much in the hands of individuals themselves. Self-development is described by interviewees as very much a response to organisational needs rather than personal fulfillment, which concurs with the research by McHugh et al (1998). Whilst most questionnaire respondents agree that individual learning is disseminated to others in the organization, a factor emphasized by Pedler et al (1997) and others, interviewees are less sure this happened, due to time pressures.

Evidence of the cyclical nature of learning described by Kolb (1984) appears to be strong in the questionnaire, with only one respondent not agreeing that they take time to question their own practice, and to analyse, discuss and learn from what happens. However, a much smaller number of respondents (12) agree that people discuss mistakes openly and

honestly, which is seen by Pedler et al (1997) to be a central part of a 'learning climate'. This is reiterated by interviewees, who describe lack of time and opportunity, personal insecurities and 'human nature' as militating against the reflection and conceptualization described by Kolb (1984). This concurs with observations by Butler (1994) and Argyris (1999) that well-educated people 'short-circuit' the learning cycle.

### **5.3.2. Collective (group) learning**

The vast majority of questionnaire respondents believe that their group/team is clear about its purpose and goals, emphasised by Senge (1990), and how that fits with the overall vision and values of the organisation, though there is some evidence of tension about this latter point (see 5.3.3.1)

Team learning is seen by many authors above as essential to move from individual to collective learning in a learning organisation (Senge 1990; Marsick & Watkins 1993), and this appears to be a strength of the R.A. Service. Teams (groups) are given sufficient responsibility and autonomy to make policy decisions within strategic boundaries, they are responsive to organisational needs, and for the most part they are connected by bonds of caring, trust and equality, based on shared experiences and meaning, as discussed by Senge (1990) and Dixon (1994).

The 'shared mental models' described by these authors is difficult to capture in the questionnaire. However, interviewees talk of shared past experiences as educationalists, in schools and the Local Authority, and many years of working in Liverpool; only one interviewee recognises that this could be a disadvantage as well as a strength, as Burdett (1994) points out. It is also clear that the two interviewees who are newer to the organisation and in less senior positions, and who do not share the same past experiences, feel less well informed and consequently less empowered to state their views (see 5.3.3.3). This points to the importance of tacit knowledge (Evans & Kersh, 2004; Nonaka, 2004), which has implications for a service in the midst of reorganisation and job losses. This supports research by Barker & Camarata (1998) which emphasises the importance of 'social exchange' in times of anxiety caused by change and disruption; some of the interviewees see the current threat to jobs as adversely affecting levels of trust and shared learning within their group.

Dixon's (1994) learning cycle is in evidence within groups, and questionnaire respondents say group discussions influence not only thinking around the task but also on the way the group is working. Communication within groups is seen as problematic for some respondents and interviewees however, being hampered by practical problems of time and venue (see 5.3.3).

There is no evidence to support Critchley & Casey's view (2004) that Local Authority teams will not work together. Employees of R.A. are part of a number of inter and intra-organisational groups, which resemble the 'activity sets' described by Reeves and Boreham (2006). The 'hard networks' and 'project teams' described by Hastings (1993) are in evidence here, with individuals attending a wide range of self-organising work teams. However, sharing the knowledge gained - both tacit and explicit - with other colleagues is more problematic.

### **5.3.3. Organisational learning**

#### **5.3.3.1. Strategy**

Although the majority of respondents agree that the organisation overall has a sense of purpose and destiny, it is clear from interviews that vision defined as strategic direction is in a state of confusion. According to Smith & Taylor (2000), such ambiguity over purpose will significantly inhibit an organisation's learning capacity. The 1999 Ofsted inspection prompted transformational change within a clear vision for raising standards in schools. The more recent Every Child Matters agenda has presented greater challenges through its much wider scope, not necessarily embraced by all employees. The transfer of financial control to schools has prompted a rapid review of policy and services which interviewees believe is based more on budgeting imperatives than on a conscious and long-term process of continuous improvement as advocated by Johnson et al (2005).

McGill & Slocum (1993) point to the importance of continuously modifying strategy as a result of ongoing monitoring and evaluation. The questionnaire produces conflicting results on this subject (Statements 24 and 27). However, interviewees suggest that the organisation is not good at this, believing that changes appear to be the result of external pressures (including the amalgamation of Children's Services) rather than built in

mechanisms for learning in the cyclical model advocated by Dixon (1994), Pedler (1997) and others. This can lead to costly mistakes. The creation of geographically-based 'Learning Networks' in Liverpool brought together clusters of schools, with the aim of learning with and from each other using an 'action learning' approach to develop innovative practice. However, the networks may disappear due to funding issues, and learning from innovative approaches towards more flexible, collaborative working could be lost (Marsick & Watkins, 1997).

Only a third of respondents agree that they are able to take part in policy and strategy formation as advocated by Pedler et al (1997). This points not only to deficiencies in structures and systems (see 5.3.3.2) but also to the lack of an overall learning approach to strategy (Pedler et al, 1997).

#### **5.3.3.2. Structures and systems**

Systems for learning from and with external organisations and service users appear to be in place, and employees of R.A. are working well as 'environmental scanners' (Pedler et al, 1997) by connecting the organisation with the environment (Marsick & Watkins, 1993; Altman & Iles, 1998). This is in contrast with responses in relation to intra-organisational consultation and communication. The existence of 'concrete silos' as described by Senge (1994) is confirmed both in the questionnaires and by most interviewees, who feel that this results in a loss of learning. The fixed nature of roles and responsibilities highlighted by Beer et al (1993) seem to have contributed to this. However, interviewees believe that there is potential to further enhance the 'enabling structures' (Pedler et al, 1997) which already exists, such as self-managing teams, cross-functional teams and collaborative groups, by capitalising on existing skills, resources and policy frameworks.

It is clear that communication with colleagues is hampered by structures and systems which make it difficult to meet and share learning, both in relation to formal meetings and informal 'networking' as described by most authors, including Hastings (1993) and Weick (1995). Feedback mechanisms (horizontal as well as vertical) from the weekly R.A. briefing meetings are described as unsatisfactory and less clear than in the past, and restricted attendance may account for the 12 respondents who do not agree that communication with senior managers is good.

I.T. systems are believed to be good in relation to access to information and knowledge, emphasised as important for learning by Page, Orange & Burke (2000), and termed ‘informating’ by Pedler et al (1997). However, it is clear from interviews that the system of ‘shared areas’ is not well understood or used, and that the intranet is seen as less reliable for communicating with users. All interviewees agree with Harrison (2005) and Smith (2001) that I.T. is no substitute for direct interaction with colleagues.

#### **5.3.3.3. Culture and leadership**

Although all the interviewees believe that the R.A. Service is a typical public sector hierarchy and bureaucracy as described by Parker & Bradley (2002) and Reeves & Boreham (2006), this is less emphatic in the questionnaires, where only 5 respondents say that rules and procedures are rigid, and less than half say there is a definite demarcation between senior managers and others. In relation to the dominance of short-term goals and targets, described as a barrier to learning by Rashman & Hartley (2002), there are differing opinions on this both from the questionnaires and the interviews.

Cameron & Quinn’s positioning of public sector organisations clearly in the ‘hierarchy culture’ is at least open to question in this case. This could be interpreted as a reflection of the greater importance given to inter-agency working, the educational background of R.A. employees, and the strengths of group working, all of which have been identified previously. Relative levels of seniority and experience may also be a factor; although it has proved difficult to capture the deeper levels of culture or basic underlying assumptions described by Schein (1999) and Johnson et al’s ‘paradigm’ (2005), it is clear from the interviews that the longer-standing employees have more comfortable relationships with senior managers based on shared cultural experiences typified by stories, symbols and rituals. This concurs with research by Jamali et al (2006) suggesting that positive relationships encourage empowerment, which serves to alleviate the negative influences of hierarchy and control.

Questionnaire respondents largely agree that creative thinking and experimentation are encouraged; this is a feature of Cameron & Quinn’s (1999) ‘adhocracy culture’, which is linked most closely with learning. However, this is inconsistent with the results of Pedler’s (1997) exercise on underlying learning processes (Section 4 of the questionnaire), which



ranks 'ideas' at the bottom (see 5.3.3.5). This could be linked to concern that help and support may not be provided if things go wrong.

There is some evidence both from the questionnaires and interviews of a lack of trust and mutual respect, which is emphasised by Prewitt (2003) and Pedler et al (1997) as essential for the development of a learning culture. Current uncertainties around reorganisation and possible job losses appear from the interviews to be at the root of this, exacerbated by the recent changes in senior management, and a perceived loss of connection with the decision-makers.

There is ambivalence in the questionnaires regarding the role of senior managers in promoting learning and shared decision making. The creation of flatter hierarchy's post-1999 was an attempt to move towards developing Koffman & Senge's (1995) ideal of effective leadership capacity throughout the organisation, rather than a dependence on leadership from the top as advocated by Garratt (1994). Critchley & Casey's (2004) argument that top managers in Local Authorities struggle to find a role may be pertinent to the new Assistant Executive Director in charge of the R.A. Service, who must establish herself as a positive catalyst for change in support of the Principal Officers she manages, who are perceived to be popular and effective.

#### **5.3.3.4. Power and politics**

Both questionnaires and interviews suggest that a majority of respondents believe both external and internal politics make it difficult to promote and sustain learning. This appears to concur with Senge's (1990) assertion that politics can destroy learning by inducing conflict and engendering compliance rather than commitment. Burnes' (2004) view that organisational politics are especially influential in times of transition and scarce resources seems particularly pertinent here.

Coopey's (2000; 2004) assertion that concepts of organisational learning are intrinsically political are difficult to confirm or refute from this research, although the undeniable existence of hierarchical structures as described by Vince (2000) and others, clearly impact on employees' power and influence, through restricted access to information and resources.

### **5.3.3.5. Underlying learning processes**

Section 4 of the questionnaire attempts a crude representation of Pedler et al's (1997) 'E-flow' model (Fig 2.8, p.30), though the authors present this as only the starting point of a group exercise which identifies more subtle blocks and biases to the balance of policy, operations, actions and ideas. Results show a clear bias towards individual actions and collective operations which is reiterated by interviewees, this again suggests a shortcutting of the learning cycle, as described by Kolb (1984) and Dixon (1994). In this the R.A. Service is seen as no different to most large organisations described by Senge (1990) and others, and accords with the perceived difficulties around participative policy making and the pursuit of ideas and creativity, which have been mentioned previously.

## ***5.4. Conclusions about the research question***

This chapter has looked in detail at the R.A. service in relation to a range of factors believed to characterise a learning organisation, drawn from a wide body of literature, with a particular focus on frameworks developed by Senge (1990), Marsick & Watkins (1993) and Pedler et al (1997). This research has used a model which attempts to make the link between three inter-dependent levels of learning: individual, collective (group) and systems-wide. It has demonstrated that strengths in one area will be adversely affected or at worst negated by weaknesses in another. Thus, though individual R.A. employees clearly have the means and the motivation to learn and develop themselves, the structures and systems hinder rather than promote the sharing of this learning. Although group learning is a strength of the organisation, learning is lost through lack of formal and informal communication caused by time restraints and organizational systems and structures. Good links are made with external agencies, local and regional, and with service users, but the learning is again sometimes lost back in the organisation. The constraints of a typically hierarchical structure are overcome mainly through well established relationships with senior managers, developed over a number of years, though this is not the case for newer employees, and geographical separation creates additional barriers. The new political agenda is testing even the most confident and empowered of employees, and organizational learning is a challenge in a climate where jobs are at risk and the future uncertain.

There is not a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer to the question of whether the Liverpool City Council Raising Achievement Service is a learning organization, and indeed if it is seen as an ideal to aspire to as advocated by Finger & Brand (1999), then it can be said simply that the research has provided evidence of positive and negative factors. Following the pragmatic approach advocated by DiBella (1995) it is more important to assess which areas can be improved and to judge what the intervention should look like. These are pursued in Chapter 6.

### ***5.5. Limitations of the study***

The range of literature on the subject of learning organisations and organisational learning is vast and wide ranging, coming from different academic and normative perspectives. Each of the three levels of learning which are outlined here merit its own study of equal and greater depth. The existing frameworks used to develop the research instrument each include many components, and it has been necessary both in the construction of the instruments and the subsequent reporting and analysis of results, to choose issues which are believed to be of particular interest and relevance.

The research covers a particular service in one sector of a Local Authority in Liverpool, and is a snap-shot taken during a very particular time of change and uncertainty. Consequently the research is not generalisable to other services, organisations or authorities; nor is it likely to offer a long term perspective of the R.A. Service, which is sure to look very different in the future. This opens opportunities for further research, as discussed in the next section. However, it is hoped that lessons can be learned from the research which will stand the Service in good stead as it moves forward, and therefore Chapter 6 provides some recommendations for improvement.

### ***5.6. Opportunities for further research***

- The time horizon for this research was cross-sectional; a more longitudinal study would elicit changes in organisational learning over time, particularly pertinent in the light of likely reconfiguration of services in the future.

- The L.C.C. Learning and Development service has been briefly referred to; a study of its role and effectiveness in promoting organisational learning would be interesting and useful.
- This research was limited to a small part of L.C.C. Children's Services; an extension of the research to other areas of the Council would provide broader insight into organisational learning in a public sector organisation.
- The existing theoretical frameworks relate to private sector organisations primarily; it would be interesting to examine in more depth the wider applicability of Marsick & Watkins (1993) 7 dimensions of organisational learning or Pedler et al's (1997) 11 characteristics of a learning company by a comparative study between public sector and private sector organisations.
- This research has suggested that learning is lost through loss of personnel and failure to transfer 'tacit knowledge'. Research in to the transfer of knowledge between individuals and specifically the implications for systems of induction and supervision, would provide insight not only into individual learning, but the structures and systems needed for organisational learning.

## 6. Recommendations

Chapter 5 draws conclusions about the research question, following an analysis of the research in the light of existing literature. This chapter completes aim 4 of the research by making appropriate recommendations to improve the current situation at the L.C.C.

Raising Achievement Service, based on the research findings.

- The research suggests that whilst formal learning opportunities are available, the role and contribution of the LCC Learning and Development Service is unclear (5.3.1). This should be investigated to ensure that provision is fit for purpose and easily accessible. Given the short-cutting of the learning cycle which is identified (5.3.1), training should be designed for greater effectiveness by including the principles of the learning cycle and encouragement of the ‘learning to learn’ process (5.3.3.1).
- Linked to the above, whilst it is clear that the Service is staffed by experienced, skilled and committed individuals (5.3.1), an audit of skills would highlight strengths and gaps, which would be useful as the Service undergoes restructure. This could be achieved through professional Development Reviews, the quality and regularity of which should be monitored more thoroughly, and which should include a ‘learning entitlement’. The development of leadership skills and training around the management of change (2.4.4) could be provided under the Workforce Strategy currently being implemented with schools.
- It has been shown that individual learning is not always shared with other individuals or between groups (5.3.1; 5.3.3.2). This could be improved by systems to encourage informal networking, and formally through the distribution of team/group minutes and briefings, the establishment of mentoring and coaching relationships (vertical and horizontal) and the regular sharing of good practice and lessons learned. All colleagues in R.A. should be invited to attend training provided for service users. Basic information exchange between groups would be improved by placing a notice board in the basement coffee/meeting area.
- Newer employees in particular, feel less ‘connection’ with senior managers, and this is both a symptom and cause of a diminished sense of trust and empowerment. (5.3.2; 5.3.3.3). Systems for the induction of new staff should be reviewed and emphasis placed on establishing relationships and networks within the Service as

well as with external agencies. This should include an expectation that time is given to 'shadow' colleagues in other groups/teams within R.A.

- The weekly R.A. briefing meetings can lack purpose and direction, and are not inclusive (5.3.3.2). The terms of reference and attendance at the meetings should be reviewed, including systems for effective feedback and synergy with strategic planning meetings. Minutes of the meeting should be easy to understand and accessible.
- The I.T. system is not being used to its full potential to improve organisational learning (5.3.3.2). R.A. employees should be given specific guidance in the use of the shared areas. Opportunities for blended learning should be promoted. Access to pertinent knowledge, e.g. government guidance, latest research, conference papers, should be facilitated through the development of a 'grid for learning' as exemplified by other Local Authorities.
- Communication within groups is seen as problematic by some respondents (5.3.2). Senior managers should clarify and monitor the role of line managers and group/team leaders in relation to communication and staff development, to ensure the appropriate use of Keeping in Touch (KIT) meetings.
- Current working conditions for most R.A. employees do not facilitate communication and learning (5.3.3.2). Levels of dissatisfaction should be acknowledged and views taken into account in any future plans for relocation. The system whereby groups working within the building must pay for meeting rooms should be reviewed.
- There is evidence of some ambiguity over vision and strategy (5.3.3.1) and the role of senior managers in promoting learning and shared decision making (5.3.3.3). The reintroduction of Director's Briefings has been welcomed; these should be supplemented by a programme of attendance by the A.E.D. at group/team meetings.
- The research highlights a dominance of day to day actions and operations over policy and ideas (5.3.3.5). The sharing of 'good ideas' by individuals and groups could be encouraged through direct communication with the Director and A.E.D. through a version of the 'suggestion box' which gives recognition and rewards to ideas which are pursued to implementation.



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## APPENDIX 1

### CHARACTERISTICS OF ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING / THE LEARNING ORGANISATION

SENGE (1990) 5 Disciplines	MARSICK & WATKINS (1993) 7 Dimensions of the Learning Organization	GARVIN (1994) Building Blocks of Learning Organizations	DIXON (1994) Elements in the Organizational Learning Cycle
Personal Mastery  Mental Models  Shared Vision  Team Learning  Systems Thinking	Provide strategic leadership for learning  Connect the organization to the environment  Empower people towards a collective vision  Create systems to capture and share learning  Promote inquiry and dialogue  Create continuous learning opportunities	Systematic problem solving  Experimentation with new approaches  Learning from their own experience and past history  Learning from experiences and best practices of others  Transferring knowledge quickly and efficiently throughout the organization	Widespread generation of information (external and internal)  Integrate new/local information into the organizational context  Collectively interpret information  Authority to take responsible action on the interpreted meaning
PEDLER, BURGOYNE & BOYDELL (1997) 11 Characteristics of the Learning Company	DENTON (1998) Characteristics of Organisational Learning	FINGER & BRAND (1999) 6 Dimensions of Learning Capacity	PHILLIPS (2004) A Four-Level Learning Organisation Benchmarking Implementation Model
Learning approach to strategy  Participative policy making  Informating  Formative accounting and control  Internal exchange  Reward flexibility  Enabling structures  Boundary workers as environmental scanners  Inter-company learning  A learning climate  Self-development opportunities for all	Learning strategy  Vision  Flexible structure  External awareness  Quality  Blame-free culture  Knowledge creation and transfer  Supportive atmosphere  Teamworking	Individual capacity to learn  Collective capacity to learn  Structural capacity to learn  Capacity to learn resulting from the organization of work  Cultural capacity to learn  Capacity of leadership to learn and promote learning	Will  Leadership  Strategic thinking and vision  Communication  Learning and development  Innovation & decision-making  Change management  Intellectual capital & knowledge management  Measurement and assessment  Reward & recognition  Four organisational functions: Chief Officer Human resources managers Line managers Employees

## **APPENDIX 2**

### **QUESTIONNAIRE AND COVERING LETTER**

Dear Colleague,

I hope you will help me by completing the attached questionnaire. I am in my final (part-time) year of a Masters Degree in Business Administration at Chester University, for which I have to write a dissertation based on a piece of work-related empirical research. My research topic is:

**‘An assessment of the Liverpool City Council Raising Achievement Service as a Learning Organisation.’**

A Learning Organisation is defined as one:

“capable of continuous regeneration from the variety of knowledge, experience and skills of individuals within a culture which encourages mutual questioning and challenge around a shared purpose or vision”

(Johnson, Scholes & Whittington, 2005, p. 589).

The questionnaire covers issues of individual, group and systems-wide learning. It is a mixture of closed (tick-box) and open questions; I would ask you to complete all the questions if you can. The exercise should take no longer than 15 minutes.

I have received permission from Stuart Smith to conduct the research, and support from the Senior Management Team.

The paper questionnaires are numbered in order to track returns across teams. The results will be cumulative and anonymous. You do not need to give your name if you do not wish to do so. However, I would ask you to give the name of your team/job title (e.g. Social Inclusion, School Improvement Partner) to ensure I have received a representative sample of Raising Achievement officers, and so any significant differences between groups can be analysed. **You can also complete the questionnaire electronically: a copy has been sent to you via e-mail, which you can complete and e-mail back to me, or print off after completion.**

I will also be conducting semi-structured interviews with around 5 colleagues during June. Interviews will last approximately 1 hour and identities will be anonymised in the report. Please indicate at the end of the questionnaire if you would be willing to be interviewed.

**Please return the questionnaires to me at Toxteth Annexe using the envelope attached, by 18 May.** I hope you feel able to help me with this: my MBA qualification is dependent on the production of a significant and reliable piece of research, for which I need a high percentage of returns. Hopefully also, the research will highlight some ways in which the Service can improve its learning capacity.

As an extra incentive, I will be putting the returned questionnaires in a ‘prize draw’; the first three drawn on 25 May will get a bottle of wine. You know it makes sense!

Thanking you in anticipation,

Yours sincerely,

Linda Kerans, Healthy Schools Consultant  
Healthy Schools Consultant



QUESTIONNAIRE TO MEMBERS OF THE LIVERPOOL CITY  
COUNCIL RAISING ACHIEVEMENT SERVICE

**'AN ASSESSMENT OF THE LIVERPOOL RAISING  
ACHIEVEMENT SERVICE AS A LEARNING  
ORGANISATION'**

This questionnaire covers issues of individual, collective (group) and systems-wide learning, which contribute to organisational learning and the development of a Learning Organisation. A learning organisation is defined as one which is:

“capable of continuous regeneration from the variety of knowledge, experience and skills of individuals within a culture which encourages mutual questioning and challenge around a shared purpose or vision”  
(Johnson, Scholes & Whittington, 2005, p. 589).

The questionnaire aims to capture your views in relation to your experience of working with the Liverpool City Council Raising Achievement Service (previously known as School Improvement / School Effectiveness). The questionnaire is a mixture of closed (tick-box) and open questions; I would ask you to complete all the questions if you can. The exercise should take no longer than 15 minutes.

**Your responses will be confidential and the results will be anonymised.**

The questionnaire can be completed by hand or electronically. Details for returning the questionnaires can be found at the end of the document.

Thank you

Linda Kerans  
Healthy Schools Consultant

In Sections 1, 2 and 3 you are asked to consider learning from an individual, collective (group/team) and organisational perspective. Please consider the following statements and decide whether **in your opinion** you agree or not with the statement. Put a cross (X) in the appropriate box, ranging from Strongly Agree, to Strongly Disagree. For example:

STATEMENT	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I am looking forward to retirement				x	

SECTION 1 – INDIVIDUAL LEARNING

STATEMENT	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. I make time to improve my learning					
2. The exploration of my learning needs is the central focus of appraisal and career planning					
3. Training /development is accessed following prior identification of learning needs					
4. Training / development is followed by analysis of whether learning needs have been met					
5. I make time to question my own practice, to analyse, discuss and learn from what happens					
6. It is most important to plan and act quickly in my job					
7. I learn best by reflecting on my experiences					
8. People here discuss mistakes openly and honestly in order to learn from them					
9. Most of my learning comes from formal training and development					
10. Most of my learning comes from informal contacts and unstructured activities					
11. Knowledge and learning obtained through individual training / development is disseminated to benefit the rest of the group/team/organisation					

## SECTION 2 – COLLECTIVE (GROUP/TEAM) LEARNING

STATEMENT	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
12. My group shares the corporate vision and values of the organisation					
13. My group is clear about its purpose and goals					
14. My group is given sufficient responsibility to make and carry out policy decisions					
15. My group focuses both on the task and on how well the group is working					
16. My group revises its thinking as a result of group discussions or information collected					
17. My group benefits from social bonds of caring and trust					
18. My group tends to be fluid and functional to respond to organisational needs					
19. My group shares its knowledge and learning with other groups in the organisation					
20. My group treats members as equals, regardless of rank, culture and other differences					
21. I have a significant amount of knowledge that is not shared with my group					
22. My group is hierarchical and bureaucratic					

## SECTION 3 – ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING

STATEMENT	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<b>3a. Strategy</b>					
23. My organisation has a sense of shared purpose and destiny based on agreed vision and values, mission and goals					
24. Deliberate, small-scale experiments and feedback loops are built into the planning process, to enable continuous improvement					
25. Policies and plans are evolved and modified as we go along					
26. All members of the organisation are able to take part in policy and strategy formation					

STATEMENT	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<b>3b. Structures and Systems</b>					
27. There are built-in mechanisms for monitoring and review to evaluate and learn from our decisions and actions					
28. We share our knowledge and experience with other Services and Authorities					
29. We actively seek out the views of service users and 'customers'					
30. Peoples' roles and responsibilities are fixed in a way which can impede experimentation and adaptation					
31. People tend to work in group/team 'silos' with little consultation or reference to each other					
<b>3c. Communication</b>					
32. Information technology is used to create databases and communication systems that help everyone understand what is going on					
33. People can obtain necessary information at any time quickly and easily					
34. The Intranet system is a reliable and effective way of communicating information and knowledge to colleagues					
35. It is easy to meet face to face with colleagues to share knowledge and understanding					
36. There are good mechanisms for two-way communication with senior managers					
<b>3d. Culture and Leadership</b>					
37. My organisation has a structure where rules and procedures are fairly rigid					
38. There is a definite demarcation between senior managers and other officers here					
39. There is a focus on short-term, measurable goals and targets here					
40. Creativity and experimentation are encouraged here					
41. If something goes wrong, you get help, support and interest in learning lessons from it					
42. There is a culture of trust and mutual respect in this organisation					
43. Senior managers here see the importance of learning for themselves and others					
44. Senior managers here promote shared policy and decision-making					
45. External power and politics make it difficult to promote and sustain what we have learned					
46. Internal power and politics make it difficult to promote and sustain what we have learned					

SECTION 4 – UNDERLYING LEARNING PROCESSES

A Learning Organisation has a **balance** of four basic learning ‘processes.’ These are:

- 1. collective **Policy** (the overall strategic vision and direction)
- 2. collective **Operations** (day–to day management)
- 3. individual **Ideas** (and creativity)
- 4. individual **Action** (or ‘getting on with the job’).

Most organisations have a bias towards some processes rather than others. Please give your view of the balance of these four processes in the Raising Achievement Service by ranking them (1 – 4) *in the order in which you believe they are currently prioritised*. If you believe two or more processes are given the same priority, give them the same number ranking.

	RANKING (1-4)		RANKING (1-4)
Policy		Ideas	
Operations		Actions	

SECTION 5 – STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

A. In your experience, what are the strengths of the Raising Achievement Service in relation to learning (individual, group, and/or organisational)?

B. In your experience, what are the weaknesses of Raising Achievement Service in relation to learning (individual, group, and/or organisational)?

C. How do you think learning can be improved in the future? This could be at the individual, group, or organisational level



## SECTION 6 – YOUR DETAILS

Your name (optional)

Male

☐

Female

☐

Job Title .....

Group / team .....

How many years have you worked in the Raising Achievement/School Effectiveness/School Improvement Service? .. years

How many years have you worked with the Local Authority / Local Education Authority (if different from above) ..... years

What was your job/profession prior to joining the L.A. / L.E.A.

.....

Thank you very much for completing this questionnaire, your time and effort are greatly appreciated. Once again I would like to assure you that your responses will be kept confidential, and no individual views will be identified without prior and explicit permission.

### **Would you be willing to be interviewed for the purposes of this research?**

Interviews will last approximately one hour and will take place at a time and location convenient to you, some time during June.

Please indicate here if you are willing to be interviewed .....

If so, please give your name and contact details .....

If you would like to receive an e-mailed summary of the findings, please give your e-mail address here .....

If you have completed an electronic copy of the questionnaire, you can e-mail it to me at: [linda.kerans@liverpool.gov.uk](mailto:linda.kerans@liverpool.gov.uk) Alternatively you can print it off and send back as a paper copy. Please return paper copies in the pre-addressed envelope attached, to me at Toxteth Annexe, Aigburth Road, Liverpool L17 7BN. You can put the envelope in the internal mailing system, hand it in to reception at Toxteth Annexe, or put it directly in my tray situated in the office basement.

Thanking you in anticipation,

Linda Kerans

## **APPENDIX 3**

### **SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. Do you take personal responsibility for your learning?
2. When you try to learn from experience, do you try to look deeper at why you are doing something, as well as how?
3. Learning can be formal and informal. Do you think you should have more/less of either?
4. Is your group/team clear about its purpose, and does that purpose change over time?
5. How much autonomy /responsibility does your group have to make policy decisions?
6. Is most of your work undertaken within your group or are you part of other networks?
7. With regard to the overall strategy for Raising Achievement, (R.A.) do you think it is evolving as a result of internal and external knowledge/ experience?
8. Do you feel you have played a part in the policy and strategy development of R.A?
9. Do you think the systems and structures in R.A. make learning from each other easier or harder?
10. Do you think communication is good – e.g. with each other, senior managers, and users?
11. Public sector organisations have been characterised as hierarchical, bureaucratic, and with a lack of trust/respect for employees. Do you think this is true of R.A.?
12. Do you believe there is a focus here on short term goals, and if so, what impact does that have on opportunities for creativity and the development of ideas?
13. What impact do you think politics has on the ability of R.A. to be a Learning Organisation?

## **APPENDIX 4**

### **PILOT TEST QUESTIONNAIRE**

How long did the questionnaire take to complete?

Were the instructions clear?

Which questions, if any, were unclear or ambiguous?

Which questions, if any, did you feel uncomfortable about answering?

Did the questionnaire miss out any major issues in relation to learning?

Was the layout clear and attractive?

Any other comments??

Thankyou very much for taking part in this pilot test.

(Pilot Test Questionnaire reproduced from Bell & Opie, 2002)

## **APPENDIX 5**

### **Letter to interviewees**

Dear xxxx,

#### **‘An Assessment of the Liverpool Raising Achievement Service as a Learning Organisation’**

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed on the above topic, which will form part of the research study submitted for my Masters in Business Administration.

As agreed, the interview will take place on (DATE) at (TIME), at (VENUE).

The interview will take no more than an hour. I will take some notes throughout but with your consent I would also like to tape-record the interview, to ensure that I miss nothing, and can concentrate better on listening and responding to your answers. The recording will be deleted following transcription.

The interview will be semi-structured; I have a ‘script’ of questions to use as a guide, but there will be plenty of opportunity to clarify and elaborate on related issues as they arise.

Everything you say during the interview will be treated confidentially; any direct quotes used in the report will be anonymised. I will not discuss your responses with other interviewees.

I hope you will feel able to answer all the questions, but you have the right to decline if you wish, and can terminate the interview at any time.

I hope you find the interview enjoyable and thought-provoking. Thank you again for your help,

Yours sincerely,

Linda Kerans

## APPENDIX 6

### QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

n = 27. Figure in brackets is percentage of completed questionnaires (%), to nearest whole number, total rounded to 100%.

SECTION 1 – INDIVIDUAL LEARNING					
STATEMENT	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. I make time to improve my learning	11(41)	13(48)	1(4)	2(7)	0
2. The exploration of my learning needs is the central focus of appraisal and career planning	0	9(33)	11(41)	7(26)	0
3. Training /development is accessed following prior identification of learning needs	1(4)	16(59)	9(33)	1(4)	0
4. Training / development is followed by analysis of whether learning needs have been met	1(4)	11(41)	13(48)	2(7)	0
5. I make time to question my own practice, to analyse, discuss and learn from what happens	11(41)	15(55)	1(4)	0	0
6. It is most important to plan and act quickly in my job	12(44)	11(41)	3(11)	1(4)	0
7. I learn best by reflecting on my experiences	11(41)	13(48)	3(11)	0	0
8. People here discuss mistakes openly and honestly in order to learn from them	0	12(44)	11(41)	4(15)	0
9. Most of my learning comes from formal training and development	1(4)	1(4)	6(22)	17(63)	2(7)
10. Most of my learning comes from informal contacts and unstructured activities	2(7)	17(63)	5(19)	3(11)	0
11. Knowledge and learning obtained through individual training / development is disseminated to benefit the rest of the group/team/organisation	4(15)	16(59)	6(22)	1(4)	0
SECTION 2 – COLLECTIVE (GROUP/TEAM) LEARNING					
STATEMENT	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
12. My group shares the corporate vision and values of the organisation	2(7)	23(86)	2(7)	0	0
13. My group is clear about its purpose and goals	7(26)	18(66)	1(4)	1(4)	0
14. My group is given sufficient responsibility to make and carry out policy decisions	5(19)	17(62)	5(19)	0	0
15. My group focuses both on the task and on how well the group is working	6(22)	18(67)	3(11)	0	0
16. My group revises its thinking as a result of group discussions or information collected	8(30)	17(62)	1(4)	1(4)	0
17. My group benefits from social bonds of caring and trust	11(41)	11(41)	2(7)	3(11)	0
18. My group tends to be fluid and functional to respond to organisational needs	9(33)	14(52)	3(11)	1(4)	0
19. My group shares its knowledge and learning with other groups in the organisation	6(22)	14(52)	4(15)	3(11)	0
20. My group treats members as equals, regardless of rank, culture and other differences	16(59)	10(37)	0	1(4)	0
21. I have a significant amount of knowledge that is not shared with my group	2(7)	3(11)	8(30)	12(45)	2(7)
22. My group is hierarchical and bureaucratic	0	0	7(26)	11(41)	9(33)



<b>SECTION 3 – ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING</b>					
<b>STATEMENT</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
<b>3a. Strategy</b>					
23. My organisation has a sense of shared purpose and destiny based on agreed vision and values, mission and goals	2(7)	16(60)	7(26)	2(7)	0
24. Deliberate, small-scale experiments and feedback loops are built into the planning process, to enable continuous improvement	1(4)	8(30)	10(36)	8(30)	0
25. Policies and plans are evolved and modified as we go along	2(7)	21(78)	3(11)	1(4)	0
26. All members of the organisation are able to take part in policy and strategy formation	3(11)	6(22)	9(33)	8(30)	1(4)
<b>3b. Structures and Systems</b>					
27. There are built-in mechanisms for monitoring and review to evaluate and learn from our decisions and actions	2(7)	19(70)	5(19)	1(4)	0
28. We share our knowledge and experience with other Services and Authorities	3(11)	17(53)	5(19)	2(7)	0
29. We actively seek out the views of service users and 'customers'	3(11)	20(74)	3(11)	1(4)	0
30. Peoples' roles and responsibilities are fixed in a way which can impede experimentation and adaptation	1(4)	2(7)	10(37)	13(48)	1(4)
31. People tend to work in group/team 'silos' with little consultation or reference to each other	2(7)	10(37)	9(33)	5(19)	1(4)
<b>3c. Communication</b>					
32. Information technology is used to create databases and communication systems that help everyone understand what is going on	1(4)	17(52)	5(19)	3(11)	1(4)
33. People can obtain necessary information at any time quickly and easily	2(7)	14(52)	6(22)	4(15)	1(4)
34. The Intranet system is a reliable and effective way of communicating information and knowledge to colleagues	2(7)	9(33)	9(33)	6(23)	1(4)
35. It is easy to meet face to face with colleagues to share knowledge and understanding	3(11)	8(30)	3(11)	11(41)	2(7)
36. There are good mechanisms for two-way communication with senior managers	4(15)	11(41)	7(25)	4(15)	1(4)
<b>3d. Culture and Leadership</b>					
37. My organisation has a structure where rules and procedures are fairly rigid	1(4)	4(15)	14(52)	7(25)	1(4)
38. There is a definite demarcation between senior managers and other officers here	3(11)	9(33)	9(33)	6(23)	0
39. There is a focus on short-term, measurable goals and targets here	2(7)	9(33)	14(53)	2(7)	0

40. Creativity and experimentation are encouraged here	3(11)	12(45)	8(29)	4(15)	0
<b>STATEMENT</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
41. If something goes wrong, you get help, support and interest in learning lessons from it	2(7)	8(30)	11(40)	5(19)	1(4)
42. There is a culture of trust and mutual respect in this organisation	3(11)	9(33)	10(37)	5(19)	0
43. Senior managers here see the importance of learning for themselves and others	4(15)	10(37)	7(26)	6(22)	0
44. Senior managers here promote shared policy and decision-making	2(7)	10(37)	11(41)	4(15)	0
45. External power and politics make it difficult to promote and sustain what we have learned	1(4)	13(48)	7(26)	6(22)	0
46. Internal power and politics make it difficult to promote and sustain what we have learned	1(4)	11(41)	9(33)	6(22)	0